

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧

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My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.



SH... SHUDDUP...

TEEHEE.
YOU'RE
BLUSHING,
YOU'RE
BLUSHING♪

THE TIME
TO BREAK
THE SEAL
HAS
COME...

材木座義輝
yoshiteru zaimokuza

YOU HAVEN'T
IMPROVED.
YOU'VE ONLY
GOTTEN MORE
PATHETIC.

SUCKING AT
STUDYING IS
PART OF MY
PERSONALITY!

IN YOUR CASE,
YOU FAIL AT
EVERY ASPECT
OF HIGH
SCHOOL LIFE.

I'M SO HAPPY.
IT'S THE FIRST
TIME YOU'VE
CALLED ME BY
MY FIRST
NAME.

...ARE YOU A
MORON?

比企谷小町
komachi hikigaya

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama

比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya

平塚 静
shizuka hiratsuka

雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita

戸塚彩加
saika totsuka

川崎沙希
saki kawasaki

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やはり俺の 青春ラブコメは まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

登場人物【character】



Hikigaya Hachiman Our protagonist. Grade 11. A contrarian.

Yukinoshita Yukino Leader of the Service Club. A perfectionist.

Yuigahama Yui Hachiman's classmate. Pays attention to others.

Zaimokuza Yoshiteru Otaku. Thinks he and Hachiman are buddies.

Totsuka Saika Tennis club member. Exudes cuteness.

Kawasaki Saki Hachiman's classmate. A delinquent?

Hiratsuka Shizuka Japanese teacher. In charge of educational guidance.

Hikigaya Komachi Hachiman's little sister. Middle school student.

Kawasaki Taishi Kawasaki Saki's little brother. Goes to Komachi's school.

Prologue

When Golden Week ends, each day starts to get hotter than the last. It's also when students with too much free time on their hands cause huge commotions, which makes the days feel hotter than they need to be. I may be the cool, hard-boiled type, but I'm also ridiculously weak against the heat. And so, in my search for somewhere just a bit cooler, I turned to uncharted waters.

The normal human body temperature is 36°C. Going by that number, hanging out with other people makes it less of a midsummer day and more like a day in a furnace. Not even I am capable of coping with such high humidity and temperature.

Cats do the same thing, you know? They go to a secluded place when it's hot. Out of my sheer desire to defend myself against the heat, I also aimed for somewhere without human presence. Mind you, it wasn't as if I felt uncomfortable in class or thought I didn't fit in or anything - nothing like that at all.

This was an act of instinct - or, to put it more bluntly, my classmates who don't do the same fail as living beings. They gather in herds because they're weak. You see, only feeble creatures form groups out of instinct. Herbivores cluster together so that they can sacrifice one of their own when they're attacked by carnivores, and my classmates are no different. They munch on the grass with innocent looks on their faces as their friends get eaten up.

So, yeah. Strong animals don't gather in herds or anything like that. Do they not know the expression "a lone wolf"? Cats are cute and wolves are cool. In other words, loners are cute and cool.

As those inconsequential thoughts took on an air of importance in my head, I kept moving my feet. My destination: the stairs to the roof. The route was cluttered with desks, so a single person could only just squeeze through.

If it was a normal day, then the door to the roof should have been locked tightly. But today, the padlock was opened and swaying in place. I guessed that some people from another class had gone to the roof to show off and make asses of themselves - you know that saying about smoke, fools and high places?

My first impulse at times like this was to show them up by stacking three desks and two chairs to block their way. My ability to take action made me awesome as usual. *How manly. Kyaa. Make love to me.*

But then I realised that it was awfully quiet past the door. How strange. As far as I knew, male and female riajuu both hated silence. It's the same concept as animals being afraid of fire. They interpret silence as boring, so in order to convince themselves that they're not boring people, they talk and squawk and jabber on. On the other hand, when they're talking to me, they swallow their boredom and appeal to me with silence. I wondered what that silence really meant... no, it's not what you think - I prefer the quiet.

From this serene silence, it really seemed as if none of those riajuu were up there. Could it be that no one was there at all?

When no one's around, you get all energetic - that's what being a loner is all about. That's how I am. It's not about being timid around others or anything like that - that's just ordinary mindfulness of others or the urge not to get in their way.

I broke down the barricade I'd just built and put my hand on the door. It was the kind of excitement I get when I wander into a noodle bar at the station for the first time, and my heart was beating the way it does when I leave Chiba and go all the way to a bookstore in Yotsukaido to buy a porn book. See, it was *because* I was a loner that I could experience such a unique high.

The wide, blue sky and the endless horizon awaited me past the door. The school rooftop was transforming into my private rooftop in front of my very eyes. Rich people want private jets and private beaches and so on. The loners who have private time to themselves are always winners at life, so that means loners should have status.

The sky was so expansive and sunny, as if telling me that I would someday have freedom in this confining world. If I described it in terms of a timeless masterpiece, it was like something from *The Shawshank Redemption*. Weeell... I never saw it, but the title makes it out to be that kind of movie.¹

Gazing into the hazy, far-off sky and gazing into the future were pretty much the same things to me. So it was the appropriate place to fill out a certain Prospective Workplace Tour Survey Form I had on hand. The workplace visit loomed over me like the fixed date of an exam.

¹ The Japanese title of *The Shawshank Redemption* is *Shawshank no Sora ni*, which literally means "Shawshank's Sky".

On that sheet of paper, I carefully listed my prospective career and the workplace I wanted to familiarise myself with, along with my reasons for doing so. I was perfectly sure of the future plans I'd instilled in myself, so my hand never strayed off the page. It didn't even take two minutes to write it all down.

...but then-

The wind blew. It was the kind of wind that brings purpose, the kind that heralds a fateful meeting after school. The single sheet of paper with my dreams written across it flew out to meet the future as if it had become a paper aeroplane.

I might have been using flowery descriptions, but I was of course talking about the paper I'd just been writing on a moment earlier. *Oi, screw you, wind, you piece of crap.*

As if teasing me, the paper fluttered to the ground, only to jump high once again just as I thought it was in my grasp.

...meh, can't be bothered. I'd get another paper and rewrite it. My favourite motto is "if it doesn't work when you try, give up", so I wasn't that upset. While we're at it, you can add "give up when the going gets tough" to that.

Shrugging, I started walking away - and that's when it happened.

"This yours?"

I heard a voice. With a start, I searched my surroundings for the owner of that slightly husky and vaguely languid voice, but there was no one around me. Solitude was normal for me, but that's not what I'm referring to right now - I couldn't find any trace of another person on this roof.

"Where you lookin'?" I heard the voice laugh scornfully from above.

If the voice was above me, then I was sure of where it was coming from. It was from the place that protruded into the sky even further than the roof did - the ladder that reached up to the water tower.

The owner of the voice was leaning against the water tower, peering down at me. As she played with a cheap-looking hundred-yen lighter in her hand, our eyes met and she furtively tucked it away into her uniform pocket.

Her long, black hair fell all the way down her back; her ribbon was untied, revealing the curve of her chest; the unnecessary parts of her shirt cuffs were loosened up; her long, sharp legs looked made for kicking. But what made an impression on me were her ambitionless eyes, which gazed vacantly into the distance. The bags under her eyes really contributed to that washed-out look.

"This yours?" the girl asked in the same tone as before.

I didn't know how old she was, so for the time being, I kept my mouth shut and nodded in reply.

You see, I'd have to be formal if she was my senpai, but if she wasn't, then that would be a cause for embarrassment. True strength keeps its cards close.

“...hang on a sec,” she sighed, as she put her hands on the ladder and climbed down swiftly.

...*but then-*

The wind blew. It was the kind of heavy wind that sweeps away a blackout, the kind that determines one's destiny. The single line of fabric which contained my dreams yielded to the divine wind as if burning itself into eternal memory.

I might have been using flowery descriptions, but basically I saw her panties. *Oi, good job, wind, you're the best!*



The girl let go of the ladder halfway down, landed lightly on her feet, and then handed the paper to me - but not before first glancing over it herself.

“...are you a moron?” she said curtly, practically hurling it at me.

As soon as I caught it, she lost no time in turning around and disappearing into the school building, never once looking back. I was left there alone, having lost my chance to say “thanks” or “what do you mean by a moron?” or “sorry I saw your panties”.

I held the paper she had retrieved for me in one hand and scratched my head with the other. At the same moment, the bell signalling the end of recess rang out from the rooftop speakers. Taking that as my cue, I turned my feet towards the door too.

“Black lace, huh...” I muttered, sighing with both deep satisfaction and deep consternation.

I wondered if the summer ocean wind would carry those words across the entire world.

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.



川崎沙希
saki kawasaki

Birthday

October 26

Special Skills

Karate

Hobbies

Making soft toys

How do you spend your days off?

Part-time job, being with my siblings



比企谷小町
komachi hikigaya

Birthday

March 3

Special Skills

Having a weak body, cooking, helping my brother

Hobbies

Saving money, mocking my brother

How do you spend your days off?

Helping cats, being with my brother who stays inside all day

Prospective Workplace Tour Survey Form



Prospective Workplace Tour Survey

Soubu High School Grade 11, Class F

Hikigaya Hachiman

1. Prospective Career:
Stay-at-home husband

2. Prospective Workplace:
My house

3. Write Your Reason(s) Below:

According to the ancients, to work is to accept defeat.
Labor is the act of putting oneself at risk in order to receive a return. It can be said, after all, that the ideal job is one that pays the maximum possible return with the minimum possible risk. Young girls (i.e. preteens) proclaim that "I want to be a bride when I grow up!" not out of cuteness, but rather because of biological instincts.
Ergo, my choice to "stay at home and not work" is perfectly sound and reasonable. My wish for this workplace tour is to familiarise myself with the work environment of a stay-at-home husband by staying at home.
QED.

Chapter 1: And So, Yuigahama Yui Decided To Study

One side of the staffroom was set up as a reception area. A partition separated a black leather couch and glass coffee table from the rest of the room. There was a window immediately nearby, from which you could see an extensive view of the library.

A brilliant early summer breeze came in through the open window, and a thin sheet of paper danced in the wind. That sentimental scene stole my heart, and I followed the movements of that scrap of paper with my eyes, curious as to how it would fall. *Gently, now.* Like a trickling tear, the paper drifted to the floor.

And then - *rip*. A stiletto pierced it like a spear.

A pair of supple legs flexed in front of me. I couldn't help but notice how long and shapely they were through the tight suit and pants that covered them.

Suits are quite stylish, but their appeal often leaves much to be desired. Pantyhose would have fulfilled the sexy requirement if a woman was wearing a skirt, but when the legs are hidden by a suit and pants, it comes off as boorish and unrefined. If a woman's legs were stick-thin and had no sex appeal, there would be no point in her wearing a suit and pants - she would just look hideous instead.

And yet the legs before me were different. They had such perfect symmetry you could say the Golden Ratio was at work.

Ah, but that didn't just apply to her legs. Her tight vest revealed the gently sloping shape of her curves, and those curves would arrive at the summit of her splendid bust before long... *OH, WAS THIS MOUNT FUJI?* Her body was finely tuned from head to toe like a violin - but not just any violin. She stood proud, as perfectly crafted as a Stradivarius.

The problem was that she also took the form of a terrible, angry Buddha, carved by genius hands. She was frightening from an art perspective, a cultural perspective and a historical perspective.

As she chewed absent-mindedly on her tobacco filter, my Japanese teacher Hiratsuka-sensei sent me a withering glare. "Hikigaya. You know where this is going, don't you?"

"W-who knows..."

The intensity never left her large eyes, and I quickly turned my face away.

As soon as I did that, Hiratsuka-sensei started cracking her knuckles. All I could hear was the ominous sound of my impending doom. "Don't tell me you don't know?"

" 'W-who knows? I know!' was what I was gonna say! You're mistaken! I know very well! I'll rewrite it! Don't hit me!"

“That goes without saying. Geez... and here I thought you’d changed a little.”

“My motto is to accomplish what I set out to do and all,” I said with a cheesy smile.

I could sense a vein popping in Hiratsuka-sensei’s forehead.

“...so my only option is beat you up after all, huh? People beat each other up on TV whenever they want to get a move on with the story.”

“N-n-no, you can’t do that to my delicate body. And anyway, the shows on TV lately have been light on violence, y’know. It really shows your age!”

“Why you...! Shocking First Bullet!”

Bonk. Her over-the-top yelling was nothing like the subdued sound her fist made when it sank into my stomach.

“...urk.”

As I lifted my head weakly - with my life dangling before my eyes - Hiratsuka-sensei snickered nastily. “If you don’t want to cop my Annihilating Second Bullet, you better keep your mouth shut from now on.”

“S-sorry...” I apologised meekly. “Please spare me the Exterminating Last Bullet.”

Hiratsuka-sensei plopped herself on her seat, satisfied. She was grinning broadly at seeing me yield so quickly to her attack. She might be the kind of person who unconsciously forgot how pathetic her words and actions were, but she really was a beautiful person on the inside.

“*s-CRY-ed*’s a great show, huh...¹ it’s good that you’re quick on the uptake, Hikigaya.”

Correction: she was just pathetic. It seemed she was only capable of laughing at her own joke.

I had recently come to learn about sensei’s hobbies. Basically, she liked hot-blooded manga and anime. I was learning so much crap I didn’t care about, whoopee.

“Now then, Hikigaya. I’ll ask you this just to be safe. What is the purpose of this shitty answer of yours?”

“You’re not supposed to swear at your student...”

¹ *s-Cry-ed* is a 2001 anime which happens to contain a lot of shonen elements and chuuni-esque battle scenes. The translations of the bullet attack names are taken from the English dub.

It would have been easier if I'd just made up something, but since I'd already channeled all my thoughts onto that piece of paper, I didn't have any more answers up my sleeve. If she couldn't understand after reading it, that was her problem.

Hiratsuka-sensei puffed out smoke from her cigarette and glared daggers at me, as if she could see right through me and knew exactly what I was thinking. "I understand what a messed up personality you have, but I thought you'd grown up a little. Didn't spending time with the Service Club influence you at all?"

"Uh-huh..." I answered, trying to think back on my time with this so-called "Service Club".

The point of the Service Club was, to put it simply, listening to the worries of other students and solving their problems for them. But in reality, it was merely an isolation ward where all the school's misfits were lumped together. I'd ended up in a situation where I was forced to help other people in order to correct my messed up personality, but since none of that had rubbed off on me exactly, my level of emotional attachment to the club was pretty much nil. What can I say?

...Totsuka was cute, though. Yep, that was about it.

"Hikigaya... you've got a seedy look in your eyes all of a sudden. You're drooling."

"Huh?! Oh, crap..." I wiped my mouth hastily with my sleeve.

That was dangerous. Something had been awakening inside me.

“You haven’t improved,” Hiratsuka-sensei said after a pause. “You’ve only gotten more pathetic.”

“Er, I get the feeling I’m nowhere near as pathetic as you are...” I mumbled. “Mentioning *s-Cry-ed* is just what you’d expect from someone as old as-”

“*Exterminating...*”

“What I mean to say is that’s very befitting of an adult woman such as yourself. I really admire your sense of duty in spreading the classics. Indeed! Seriously, you’re awesome!” I blurted out. I did whatever I could to avoid getting punched.

It worked, because Hiratsuka-sensei lowered her fist. But she glared at me with her characteristically sharp eyes, reminding me of a rabid beast. “Geez...” she said finally. “Anyway, resubmit your Prospective Workplace Tour Survey Form. When you’ve done that, I want you to count up all the survey forms as penalty for hurting my feelings.”

“...yes’m.”

There was an overgrown stack of papers in front of my eyes. Sorting through each sheet one at a time was gruelling, like working at a bread factory. Or maybe as a lifeguard.

Being alone with my female teacher was not exactly a heart-throbbing development, and of course if she hit me I wouldn't fall over and end up touching her breasts like an accidental pervert. That was all complete bullshit. Such lies! I demand an apology from every dating sim writer and light novel author out there.

1-2

At Chiba Municipal Soubu High School, there's an event called a "workplace tour" which happens when you're in eleventh grade.

The survey forms are used to determine the occupation students are interested in learning more about and then the school actually send the students to that workplace. It was part of the new-fangled education program to instill in every student's heart the desire to work for a company. It wasn't such a big deal, really. Every school probably had an event just like it.

The problem was that it came straight after the midterms. In other words, doing these various odd jobs would suck up my precious time before the tests.

"So why am I stuck doing it at this time of the year...?" I asked, squirming.

As I sorted the pile of papers into occupation types, Hiratsuka-sensei sat at the open desk, holding a smoke in her mouth. "It's *because* it's this time of the year, Hikigaya," she replied. "Didn't you hear that you'll be picking your third-year course right after the summer break?"

"Not a clue, ma'am."

"You should have heard this at homeroom..."

“Well, in my case, I was away from homeroom so I didn’t hear it at all.”

No, really, why was it called “homeroom”? It wasn’t your home. I really hated that. And plus, I was sick of that whole system of assigning your own duties at homeroom. You were given the chance to stand up in front of the class and give out orders, but I wished everyone would stop going completely quiet whenever I did it. If someone like Hayama gave out orders, everyone would be all smiles and listen attentively like a happy little family, but when I did it, no one would ever say a word. The hell? In fact, no one even booed me since they all pretended to be away.

“…anyway, the workplace tour takes place after midterms and before summer break. It’s there so that you can take your exams with a clear purpose in mind, not so that you can be all airy fairy about them.”

I doubt it’ll work, though, Hiratsuka-sensei added, blowing out a ring of smoke from the end of her cigarette.

The school I went to, Chiba Municipal Soubu High School, was dedicated to preparing students for university. The majority of students hoped to advance to university and many of them actually did so. It was something they kept in mind from the moment they entered high school.

Whether it was because I’d calculated that university was a four-year moratorium from the start, my so-called “outlook towards the future” was lacking. I’d already thought clearly about what I was going to do when I grow up. I was definitely not going to work.

“Seems like you’re thinking some good-for-nothing thoughts...” Hiratsuka-sensei rolled her eyes. “So are you entering the science division or the humanities division?” she asked.

“Well, you see, that is, I-”

As soon as I opened my mouth, a loud voice interrupted me. “Ah, there you are!”

She was shaking her head in a bad temper, her bright hair (which was all bunched up like a dumpling ball) turning back and forth. As usual, she wore a short skirt and a shirt with two or three buttons undone, revealing her sizable bosom. It was Yuigahama Yui, who had become my acquaintance lately. The fact that we were only acquaintances even though she was in my class said a lot about my communicative powers. They sucked.

“Oh hey, Yuigahama,” said Hiratsuka-sensei. “Sorry, I’m borrowing Hikigaya from you.”

“I-it’s not like he belongs to me or anything! It’s totally okay!” Yuigahama denied vehemently, waving her hand. I got a “it’s not like I need him anyway” sort of nuance from that. Being denied so completely kind of hurt a little bit...

“What’s your business?” I demanded.

The person who answered was not Yuigahama, but the girl who suddenly appeared behind her. Her black hair (which was tied up in twin-tails) bobbed up and down, matching her abrupt movement. “You never come to the clubroom, so she went looking for you. Yuigahama-san, I mean.”

“Um, you didn’t have to make a point of that last part. I figured as much.”

This black-haired girl whose only redeeming feature was her face was Yukinoshita Yukino. Like a porcelain doll, she was breathtaking to behold, but her attitude was deathly cold as if it, too, was the stuff of porcelain. As you might be able to guess from how she burned me as soon as she saw me, we were not the best of chums.

Yukinoshita and I were in the same club - the Service Club - for now. She was the leader. And in the course of our activities we were at each other’s throats, only sometimes managing to get along. Basically, we just had this hopeless, never-ending squabble going on between us where we poured salt onto each other’s wounds.

Upon hearing Yukinoshita’s words, Yuigahama folded her arms and scowled. “I went around asking everyone where you were,” she complained. “Everyone was like ‘Hikigaya? Who’s he?’ It was sooooo weird.”

“You don’t have to tell the world about it.” Just how did this chick manage to shoot a bullet through my heart every time? She wasn’t even aiming. Was she some genius sniper or what?

“It was sooooo weird,” she repeated herself for some retarded reason, frowning. Thanks to her, the knowledge that no one at school even knew who I was gouged my innards for the second time.

Well, it wasn't *all* that bad, especially if you knew everyone else at school. Judging from how nobody knew me after all this time, I might have stumbled on the occupation that suited me perfectly: ninja.

“What? Um, sorry.” *Sorry nobody knows I even exist.* It was the first time I'd ever apologised for something so sad.

If I didn't have such a strong sense of will, I'd be crying buckets from my eyes.

“I-it's no big deal, but...” Yuigahama started playing with her fingers in front of her chest. “Th-that is, um...” she said shyly, puffing out her cheeks. “T-tell me your cell phone number? Y-you see! It's weird having to go around looking for you everywhere, and plus it's embarrassing... whenever someone asks me about our relationship, I just - no.”

Her face went red, as if the mere recollection that she had gone looking for me was unbearably embarrassing. She averted her eyes from me, folded her arms tightly in front of her chest and turned her head the other way. And then she peeped at me through the corners of her eyes.

“Weeeell, it’s not such a big deal, really...” I said as I took out my cell phone. As soon as I did that, Yuigahama pulled out an enormous, sparkling cell phone of her own. “What’s with that giant brick of a cell phone?”

Yuigahama jerked. “Huh? Isn’t it cute?” she insisted as she showed me her cheap-looking cell phone strap. Some soft toy that looked like a mushroom hung from the strap and jingled as she shook it. It was supremely depressing.

“Don’t ask me. I don’t understand the aesthetic sense of a slut. So you like shiny things? Are you talking about glass or sushi joints or what?”

“Huuh? *Sushi*? And don’t call me a slut!” Yuigahama looked at me with the eyes of a man-eating monster.

“Hikigaya. If you say ‘shiny things’, then you really have no idea what it’s like to be a high school student¹. Nobody puts glass on their sushi,” Hiratsuka-sensei interjected, her eyes sparkling. “But that’s just sushi.”

That “I said something cool just now!” look on her face kind of pissed me off ...

“If you can’t see the cuteness, isn’t that the fault of your dead fish eyes?”

¹ The joke here is that ‘shiny things’ also refers to ‘hikarimono’, a kind of shiny fish that is used in sushi toppings.

My reputation as the authority on dead fish eyes was only getting stronger.
Whatever, I give up.

“Well, whatever,” said Yuigahama. “You can synch your phone up with mine, right?”

“Nah. I have a smart phone so I can’t.”

“Huuuh? So I have to type it out?” She groaned. “What a pain.”

“I don’t need that kind of function. I pretty much hate cell phones anyway. Here.” I handed my cell phone over to Yuigahama, who took it nervously.

“I-I’m typing it out, huh... that’s okay, I guess. Wait, I’m amazed you’d hand over your phone to someone just like that.”

“Meh, there’s no problem if you see what’s on my phone. I only get mails from my sister and Amazon, anyway.”

“Whoa! Serious?! And wait - Amazon?!”

Leave me alone.

Yuigahama began typing away on the phone I'd given to her with an impressive speed. To my slow eyes, she was the complete opposite of me - quick and sharp. *I hereby dub her the Ayrton Senna of cell phones.* "You're so fast at typing..."

"Huh? This is nothing. Maybe your fingers are shrivelling 'cos you've got no one to text?"

"I'm affronted," I said. "I used to text girls all the time in middle school."

Thud. Yuigahama dropped the phone. (*Oi, watch what you're doing with my stuff,* I thought.)

"No way..."

1-3

“Um, do you realise how cruel your reaction was just now?” I said to Yuigahama. “You don’t, do you? Work on it.”

“...oh.” Yuigahama backpedalled. “I just, uh, couldn’t imagine you with a girl, Hikki...” She picked up the fallen cell phone, smiling sheepishly.

“Foolish girl,” I said. “I’m the bee’s knees. Let me fill you in on how awesome I am. When our classes got shuffled and everyone was exchanging phone numbers, I was so popular all I did was take my phone out and look around awkwardly when this girl called out to me and said, *‘Um, fine, let’s exchange numbers.’*”

“ ‘Fine’, she says. Kindness can be a cruel mistress.” A genial smile came upon Yukinoshita’s face.

“Spare me the pity! We totally texted each other after that.”

Yuigahama stared down at the cell phone. “What kind of girl was she?” she asked indifferently. But strangely enough, her high-speed finger movements also came to a complete standstill.

“Let’s see...” I said. “She was a healthy and reserved girl. Why, she was so healthy that when I texted her at seven in the evening, I got a reply the next morning that said, ‘Sorry, I was asleep~ see you at school~’, and she was so discreet and graceful that talking to me in the classroom was embarrassing for her.”

Yuigahama put a hand over her mouth. “Oh, that means...” She stifled a sob, tears leaking out of her eyes.

She didn’t even need me to point out how pathetic I was. She was clearly realising it herself.

“So she ignored your texts by pretending to be asleep. Hikigaya-kun, stop averting your eyes from the truth. Face reality.”

You say something, Yukinoshita-san? What’s with that gleeful look on your face, Yukinoshita-san? Screw you too, Yukinoshita-san!

“...I know everything there is to know about reality. I know so much I may as well make a Hikipedia.”

Pffft, hahaha! This sure brought back memories. I was so innocent back then. I hadn’t suspected the girl had asked my number out of pity and answered my texts because she felt sorry for me. I caught on eventually after two weeks, when she wouldn’t respond no matter how many texts I sent her, and so I quit.

And then one day I overheard the girls talking.

“That Hikigaya guy’s been texting me. I wish he’d quit it. It’s creepy.”

“I bet he likes you, Kaori...!”

“Eww, gross!”

I wanted to shrivel up and die on the spot. And I’d really, really liked her, too!

Now I feel sorry for my former try-hard self who spammed emoticons in every text. I thought using love hearts was disgusting, so I used stars and smilies and musical notes. Just thinking about it sends shivers down my spine zomg srsly.

“Hikigaya...” Hiratsuka-sensei said, evidently moved. “Th-then will you exchange numbers with me? I promise to text you back. I won’t pretend to be asleep.” As she said that, she swiped my phone off Yuigahama’s hand and started punching her number in. Her level of pity for me was off the charts.

“Um, you don’t have to be *that* nice to me...”

I mean, getting texts from your teacher is really sad. It’s no different from getting chocolates from your mother every year at Valentine’s Day. Screw her pity. I’d rather be subjected to Yukinoshita’s indifference at times like this.

In the end, the two of them added their numbers to my cell phone and handed it back to me. It was only a bit of data they added so it wasn't like anything had really changed, but for some reason I felt the weight behind their actions. So this was the weight behind bonds, huh?

...pretty flimsy, really. It's laughable how much my past self would have clung so desperately to such a meagre amount of kilobytes of data. As I thought to myself how freaking useless those memories were to me nowadays, I opened up my contacts. And there, I saw a name written out:

☆★YUI★★☆

Oh come on, how would that even be listed? It didn't start with a letter from the alphabet. And plus, it reeked of a spam address no matter how I looked at it. How befitting of Yuigahama and her sluttiness. I closed the phone without looking further.

Since I was getting pretty good at doing odd jobs, I only had a couple of sheets left. I started putting them away quickly.

Hiratsuka-sensei cleared her throat conspicuously, glancing sideways at me. "Hikigaya, that's enough. Thanks for helping out. You can go now," she said as she lit up the smoke in her mouth without even looking.

I wondered if the outbreak of pity from before had a lasting impact over her. Hiratsuka-sensei was being awfully nice. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that this was only relatively speaking and she wasn't acting any nicer than a normal person.

“Right. Off to my club duties, then.” I picked up my schoolbag, which had fallen to the carpet, and slung it over my right shoulder. Inside, there were a bunch of textbooks covering the content of the midterms and a manga I was planning to read at the clubroom.

It would probably be another ordinary time-wasting day with nobody approaching the club for its services.

I walked off with Yuigahama on my heels. I wished she’d hurry up and go home already. *Quit following me, geez...* Just as I was nearing the door, I heard a voice behind me. “Oh, right. Hikigaya. I forgot to tell you this before, but you’ll be going in groups of three for the upcoming workplace tour. You can choose your own groups, so think it over.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

As soon as she said that, I deflated. My shoulders slumped and everything.

“...oh man. I *really* don’t want my classmates coming over to my place.”

“So you’re really that bent on having your workplace tour at home, huh...?” Hiratsuka-sensei shuddered in the face of my steely will.

“I thoroughly despise the idea of choosing my own group,” I declared.

“Huh? What kind of crap are you-”

I swung around suddenly, flicking my hair up at the same time. And then, as my eyes opened sharply, I gazed at Hiratsuka-sensei with all the intensity my eyeballs could muster. While we're at it, my teeth were sparkling, too.

“The pain of a loner isn't that big a deal! I'm used to it!”

“That's really sad...”

“W-what fools you are. A superhero is always a loner, you know. And superheroes are cool. In other words, ‘Loner = cool’.”

“Indeed, there are heroes who do say the only friends you need are love and courage¹,” said Yukinoshita.

“I know right? Hey, you're pretty genre savvy.”

“Yes, I'm interested in this subject. Just when did you realise as a child that you had no love or courage or friends, I wonder?”

“That's a pretty perverse interest...”

¹ This is Anpanman's motto. Anpanman is a popular children's superhero.

But, well, Yukinoshita had a point. I had no love or courage or friends. Those were just pretty words, sugarcoating the truth with pleasant lies and fiction. At heart, they were nothing more than words of wish-fulfillment and self-centered satisfaction. And so I had no friends. While we're at it, no, the ball is not my friend either².

Kindness, pity, love, courage, friends - and yes, even the ball - I had no need of them.

² A reference to the main character's motto in the iconic soccer manga *Captain Tsubasa*: "The ball is my friend."

1-4

Fourth floor of the special building, east side - there, you could find a room to look down at the grounds if that was what you wanted.

The sounds of youth came in through the open window. The voices of diligent boys and girls in the midst of their club activities reverberated throughout the room, mixed with the clanging of metal bats and high-pitched whistles and accompanied by the clarinets and trumpets from the concert band.

Amidst that wonderful BGM of youth, what were we at the Service Club doing? Absolutely nothing. I was reading the shojo manga I'd borrowed from my sister, Yukinoshita was immersed in a pocket-sized book with a leather cover, and Yuigahama was playing with her phone listlessly.

As usual, when it came to living out our youth to the fullest, we got zero points.

What sort of dumbass club was this where all we did was waste time? It was like how the rugby club turned into a mahjong club. I heard they played half games before and after practice. Because of that, you could always see the rugby club coins (the currency circulated within the rugby club. Totally not real money. Its main feature was that it looked a lot like a Japanese yen coin) scattered in the classroom and the hallway the next day. If you asked me, it was only mahjong, but to those guys it was cutting-edge communication and a sparkling page of their youth.

Just how many of those guys who took part in those games were even aware of the rules of mahjong before they started?

There couldn't be that many people who played Shanghai or Strip Mahjong at Tsudanuma's arcade centre like I did. I'm pretty sure those guys only studied and learned the rules of mahjong so that they could suck up to each other. Incidentally, the rules are completely different for Shanghai Mahjong even though you use the same tiles. In other words, you only learn the rules of Strip Mahjong for one reason. People really muster up the energy when boobs are at stake.

Having a common element is absolutely indispensable when it comes to making friends. That was the kind of ilk Yuigahama Yui had once belonged to.

Those thoughts went through my mind as I finished checking if the characters really had done the dirty deed in the shojo manga I was reading. When I was done, I turned my gaze towards Yuigahama. She was holding her phone in one hand with a vague smile floating on her lips, but she was sighing deeply - only so softly it was inaudible. I couldn't hear the sound of her sigh, but I realised how deeply she was exhaling from how much her chest heaved.

“What's wrong?”

The one who said that wasn't me - it was Yukinoshita. It seemed she had realised Yuigahama's strange behavior without even looking up from her book. Perhaps she *had* heard that sigh. Just what you'd expected from Devilman, whose devil ears were the ears of hell¹.

¹ A reference to the OP of *Devilman*.

“Oh, uh... nothing, I guess,” said Yuigahama. “I just got this weird text, so I was all like whoa.”

“Hikigaya-kun, unless you’d like to end up in court, I suggest you stop sending those obscene texts immediately.”

So she was assuming that this was a sexting case and that I was the culprit.

“It wasn’t me...” I said. “Where’s the proof? Show me the proof, I say.”

With a smirk, Yukinoshita flipped her hair over her shoulder. “You just proved my point. Those are clearly the words of a criminal. ‘Where’s the proof?’ ‘What a brilliant deduction; shouldn’t you become a novelist or something?’ ‘There’s no way I can stay in the same room as a murderer.’”

“That last one’s more like the words of a victim...” I said. It reeked of a death flag.

Yukinoshita nodded at what I said. “Perhaps you’re right,” she replied as she flipped a page in her book. It seemed she was reading a mystery novel, of all things.

“Nah, I don’t reckon Hikki’s the culprit, you know?” Yuigahama said, half a minute too late.

Yukinoshita's hand, which was in the midst of turning a page, stopped suddenly. "Where's the proof?" she asked with her eyes alone. Man, did she want me to be a criminal that badly?

"Hmmm, well, you see, the text was about my class. So that means Hikki's got nothing to do with it."

"But I *am* in your class..." I said.

"That makes sense," said Yukinoshita. "In that case, Hikigaya-kun couldn't have been the culprit."

"So she accepted *that* as evidence..."

Hello everybody, this is Hikigaya Hachiman from grade 11, class F.

I was so butthurt I did a self-introduction in my head without even realising it. But I'd escaped criminal charges, so maybe that was a good thing.

"Weeell, I guess these things happen from time to time," Yuigahama said solemnly as she closed her phone lid with a snap. "I won't worry about it too much." It was like she was speaking from deep personal experience.

She said “from time to time”, but I never got a text from that sender, just so you know.

…good thing I don’t have friends, huh!

No, but seriously, people who have plenty of friends have to put up with a lot of crap. Seemed like tough work, honestly. On that note, I was liberated from the disgraceful worldly ideas my classmates had been tarred with. With all my profound thoughts, I was totally the Buddha himself. I’m so great.

And with that, Yuigahama refused to touch her phone.

I had no way of guessing what was in that text, but it probably wasn’t pretty. Yuigahama was a fool, to say the least, and she was the kind of fool who wore her heart on her sleeve. She was a total softie who always worried herself over Yukinoshita and I, and so she probably also had a side of her that got unusually down-hearted over things.

As if forcefully shaking her depression away, Yuigahama leaned back against her chair and stretched.

“…there’s nothing to do.”

1-5

Without her phone to waste time on, Yuigahama slouched idly against the back of her chair. Doing that made her chest stick out unintentionally, which really made me hot and bothered, so I switched my gaze over to Yukinoshita, whose chest didn't inspire any such reaction.

Yukinoshita, whose breasts were the triumphant epitome of Safe For Work, closed her book shut. "Then why don't you study if you've got nothing to do?" she said to Yuigahama with a note of disapproval in her voice. "Midterms will soon be upon us, after all."

From the way she spoke, Yukinoshita lacked any sense of urgency whatsoever. To her, it was someone else's problem entirely. But that stood to reason - to Yukinoshita, the midterms were nothing more than routine work. This chick was the number one ranked student in just about anything you could get tested on. It went without saying that not even the midterms could ruffle her.

Yuigahama turned away looking somewhat put off, as if she was well aware of that too. "What's the point of studying?" she mumbled out of the corner of her mouth. "No one uses that stuff in real life..."

"You just uttered the standard dunce line!" I exclaimed. It was just so horribly predictable that it took me off guard. Were there seriously people who said stuff like that nowadays?

Inflamed at being called a “dunce”, Yuigahama desperately clung to her position. “There isn’t any use for studying, I mean it! High school life is short and that sort of stuff is a waste of time! You only live once, ya know?”

“But that means you can’t screw up.”

“Omigosh, you’re such a wet blanket!”

“I prefer to think long-term.”

“In your case,” said Yukinoshita, “you fail at every aspect of high school life.”

Pretty much. You can’t always win everything. Wait, come on! Was she saying that I didn’t have a life? That I should check out of my earthly existence the same way people check out of a hotel?

“You know what? I haven’t failed... I’m just different from other people. It’s my personality! Everybody is different, everybody is good!”

“Y-yeah! It’s my personality! Sucking at studying is part of my personality!”

We both yelled out dumb clichés at the exact same moment. But really, “personality” is such a convenient word.

“Kaneko Misuzu would have turned over in her grave if she heard that... ¹” Yukinoshita sighed, face-palming. “Yuigahama-san, what you said earlier about studying being meaningless is incorrect. In fact, studying is the act of finding your own meaning. Because of that, different people might have different reasons for studying, but that is no reason to deny the entire purpose of studying.”

It was a sound argument. So sound, in fact, that it would go right over an adult’s head - which is to say that it would go in one ear and out the other. Even a deceptively simple statement like “Just what is studying?” would cause that effect. So anyone who was trying to become an adult these days wouldn’t get the message.

Actually, I wasn’t just showing off how smart I am yet again by coming to that conclusion. The one who genuinely believed in it was Yukinoshita, it seemed.

“But you’re the smart one, Yukinon...” Yuigahama said in a small voice. “I’m just not cut out for studying... and plus no one in my group does it...”

Yukinoshita’s eyes suddenly narrowed. Sensing that the temperature of the room had dropped at least ten degrees through Yukinoshita’s frosty silence, Yuigahama shut her mouth, startled. It looked as if she still remembered all the nasty things Yukinoshita had uttered to her once before.

¹ Kaneko Misuzu is the poet who wrote *Watashi to Kotori to Suzu to* (lit. A Bell, a Bird, and Me), which features the line, “Everybody is different, everybody is good.” It’s quite a nice poem about accepting people for their differences.

She caved in on her own volition. “k-kay, I’ll do it properly!” she insisted vehemently. “A-anyway! Hikki, do you study at all?!”

Oooh, so she had dodged Yukinoshita’s wrath. It seemed her cunning plan was to push the brunt of the attack onto me. Nice try, Yuigahama.

“Yeah, I study,” I said.

“Traitor! I thought you were a dunce like me!”

“Bitch, please. I was ranked third in Japanese.” I paused for effect. “Plus, I’m not bad at my other subjects either.”

“No way... I had no idea...”

Incidentally, they don’t post up the test results at this school. They only tell you about your ranking and score in person. As a result, while people did reveal their rankings to each other, no one knew mine - because there was nobody I could have told. Pretty much no one asked me what my ranking was.

Of course, nobody asked me anything about myself in general.

“So does that mean you’re actually smart, Hikki?!”

“That’s not much to brag about,” said Yukinoshita.

“...why are you answering for me?” Well, *of course* my scores were nothing compared to Yukinoshita’s, but they were far from horrible.

That meant Yuigahama was far and away the biggest dunce between the three of us.

“Aww,” she whined. “So I’m the only dumb character here.”

“Don’t jump to that conclusion, Yuigahama-san.” Yukinoshita's frigid tone and expression had defrosted, and her eyes showed clear conviction.

Upon hearing those words, Yuigahama’s face brightened up like a light bulb. “Y-Yukinon!”

“You’re not a fictional character. Your stupidity is a natural trait.”

“Waaaaaah!” Yuigahama beat her hands against Yukinoshita’s front.

Looking as if she had absolutely no idea how to react to that, Yukinoshita let out a short, strained sigh. “What I’ve been trying to say is that measuring a person’s worth solely by their exam scores and their ranking is foolish. There are remarkably inferior human beings even among high-ranking students.”

“Hey, why are you looking at me as you say that?” I asked. For a brief moment, I got stares from all directions. “I’ll say this just in case, but you *do* know I study because I like it?”

“That so...”

“That’s because you had nothing better to do.”

The two girls spoke in unison. Yuigahama uttered the single word exclamation of surprise, while the longer statement belonged to Yukinoshita. Their foreheads pressed against each other’s without them even realising it.

“Yeah, but neither do you,” I said to Yukinoshita.

“But you didn’t deny it,” she said.

“Deny it already! It’s making me feel kinda sad!” Yuigahama shouted.

Yukinoshita spoke as coolly as ever, but Yuigahama was fired up with empathy. Yuigahama embraced Yukinoshita warmly, as if she was even trying to soothe the wounds in Yukinoshita’s heart. Yukinoshita had “...can’t breathe!” written all over face yet didn’t utter a single word voicing her discomfort. All the while Yuigahama went on squeezing her tightly.



Oi, come on! What about me?! I don't have anything better to do than studying either! I thought as it became clear that no hugs or squeezes were forthcoming in my direction. Well, I suppose it would have been awkward for me if she *had* hugged me, come to think of it.

But seriously, why do those riajuu creatures get so touchy-feely with each other? Is skinship such a natural occurrence, huh? Do they think they're Americans, huh? They'll muck around and hit each other for a joke, but if something serious happened, they'll hug each other as if that's the really smart thing to do. If those guys and gals ever piloted an Eva, they wouldn't even be able to use an AT Field. There is no limit to the kindness in their hearts².

² A reference to the special ability used by Eva pilots in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The more psychologically messed up you are, the stronger the AT fields you create.

1-6

As she was holding Yukinoshita's head and stroking it, Yuigahama opened her mouth. "But y'know, Hikki, I was kinda surprised you study so hard."

"Nah, it's not like I'm studying because I want to progress with my education like the other students or anything. I'm not taking any summer courses."

Chiba Municipal Soubu High School was dedicated to preparing students for university. As a result, the university entrance rate was quite high. My fellow students who were aware of that probably already had entrance exams on their brains since the summer of their second year in high school. It was getting close to the time when they would start worrying about whether they'd attend the help seminar at Tsudanuma or the Kawai Cram School Centre or the school at Inage-Kaigan.

"Oh, but there's one thing," I added. "I *am* aiming for a scholarship at my prep school."

"...schoolship?" Yuigahama repeated.

"In your case, you don't need to aim for anything when you've already reached your pinnacle," said Yukinoshita. "You're much like industrial waste."

“What’s this, Yukinoshita? You’re being nice today. I thought you’d deny my right to live outright.”

“An excellent suggestion.” Yukinoshita pressed a finger against her forehead, a nasty look on her face.

“Hey, hey, what’s a schoolship?”

It seemed Yuigahama had been lost ever since the ‘scholarship’ part. Wow really, Yuigahama-san?

“A scholarship is when you receive a money grant for your studies,” Yukinoshita explained.

“Prep schools these days are exempting good students from paying the tuition fees,” I said. “Basically, if I get a scholarship, the money my parents pay to the prep school goes to me.”

I did a little dance when that realisation hit me. To the open disgust of my little sister, I started breakdancing in my room.

My parents would rest easy if I could study diligently with a clear purpose in mind and reap the results to justify their investment. And I could pocket the money while I was at it. It was an ingenious plan, if I do say so myself.

But both girls looked highly doubtful. “Isn’t that fraud...?”

“There is no problem for him since you can’t claim he’s disadvantaging his parents by adopting a results-oriented approach to his classes, and it’s only really a matter of a prep school accepting a scholarship student. According to this boy’s twisted personality, you cannot by any means call it fraud,” Yukinoshita said scathingly.

S-so what, okay? A little white lie doesn’t hurt anyone.

Yuigahama glanced at me. “So that’s your plan in life, huh...” she murmured. And then she clung onto Yukinoshita’s sleeve even more tightly than before.

Startled at her intensity, Yukinoshita peered down at Yuigahama’s face with tentative concern. “Is something the matter...?”

“Oh, um, nothing, I guess...” Yuigahama said, not fooling anyone with her nervous laugh. “I was just thinking that since you guys are so brainy, I dunno if we’ll ever meet again after we graduate.”

“Indeed...” Yukinoshita said with a slight smile. “I for one won’t be seeing Hikigaya-kun ever again.”

I just shrugged wordlessly at that. Puzzled at my lack of verbal reaction, Yukinoshita glared at me quizzically. *Give me a break. I'm agreeing with you here, Yukinoshita.*

Well, they did exist in this world: people who studied their arses off so that they could get into the most elitist school away from their middle school companions. Those types decide to throw away their past and swear never to meet their classmates ever again. Yuigahama more or less hit the nail on the head about those types.

Then there were the people who clung to their friendships by communicating with those in their group. With technology, they could retain some shred of intimacy. So pretty much anyone who refuses to stay in touch ends up alone. What I mean to say is that you *only* connect to others through phone or email, or you never connect at all. Could you call that friendship? I'm sure you could. That means cell phones handle everything for everyone, and the number of friends you have can be equated to the number of cell phone contacts you have.

Yuigahama gripped her cell phone tightly as she flashed Yukinoshita a smile. "But there's no problem since we've got phones. We'll always stay in touch!"

"Yes, but I'd like you to stop sending me texts every day..." Yukinoshita replied.

"Huh?! Y-you don't like it...?"

Yukinoshita was silent for a moment, searching for words. “It is at times an extreme nuisance.”

“How blunt!”

...those two really got along well, though. Since when did they get so chummy that they’d be sending texts? On that note, I couldn’t imagine what Yukinoshita’s texts would even look like. “Just what kind of texts have you been sending every day?”

“Uhh...” said Yuigahama. “Stuff like ‘I ate a cream puff today ☆’ ”

“I said ‘indeed’,” said Yukinoshita.

“ ‘Yukinon, can you make cream puffs?! I want to try eating other sweets next time!’ ”

“ ‘Very well’.”

“What sparkling conversational skills, Yukinoshita...”

Yukinoshita looked away guiltily. “There’s not much to contribute,” she grumbled. It was sad that I knew how she felt.

No, really, what are you supposed to say to that kind of small talk? Stuff like the weather was a conversational staple, but it ends right after they say “Nice weather, huh?” and you say “Yeah”. It was like saying, “Er, uh, un ange passe. Eheheh,” after an awkward silence on the phone.

“Yeah... I don’t put much stock in cell phones,” I said. “I think it’s quite an imperfect means of communication.”

I think those cell phone things are a certain type of device that emphasises loner behaviour. You can leave your phone alone even when there’s an incoming call, you can block numbers, you can refuse to answer your texts - stuff like that. You can choose to accept or deny all communication depending on your mood at the time.

“Indeed. The receiver is obligated to answer a text or pick up the phone.” Yukinoshita nodded firmly at my casual mutterings.

She’s not bad when you’re only looking at her face. Come to think of it, that’s probably why she’s been asked for her phone address and number by so many different people.

As for me, there was this one time when I mustered up the courage to ask a cute girl for her phone address. This was back when I was an innocent middle schooler. Whenever I asked for her address, she told me, “Sooooorry, my battery’s dead right now. I’ll text it to you later, okay?” It was a mystery how she never told me her address and yet for some reason intended to send it to me. I’m still waiting for it to this day...

“Besides, I don’t look at any texts which disgust me...” Yukinoshita admitted, as if as an afterthought.

“Hmmm?” Yuigahama pressed her index finger against her chin and tilted her head to the side. “So that means... my texts disgust you?”

“...I didn’t say that.” Yukinoshita, who had been staring straight at Yuigahama until now, turned her eyes away. “They’re just a nuisance.” Her face was red. It was a kind of cute reaction, I guess, but since it had nothing to do with me, I gave zero shits.

Upon seeing Yukinoshita’s expression, Yuigahama jumped and let out a squeee. Mysteriously enough, Yukinoshita turned away with a softened look on her face - she had completely defrosted. Again, it had nothing to do with me, so I gave zero shits.

“Oh, I see. But phones aren’t that perfect, yeah.” Yuigahama held onto Yukinoshita’s body tightly, as if pained over how shallow their bond was. “I’ll study real hard, yep... it’ll be awesome if I could go to the same school as you,” she went on in small voice, her gaze dropping to the floor. “Have you decided on your university and stuff, Yukinon?”

“No, not in definite terms. I plan to enter the science faculty at a public nation-wide university, however.”

“You know so many big words!” Yuigahama exclaimed. Then she said, “So, um... what about you, Hikki? I m-may as well ask you too.”

“Liberal arts at a private university.”

The smile returned to Yuigahama’s face. “That sounds doable!”

Oh, come on, what was with that reaction? “I told you this before, but studying liberal arts at a private university is no walk in the park. I demand you apologise to all the private liberal arts departments in the country. You and I aren’t even on the same level.”

“Ooooh... so I’ll work hard, then!” Yuigahama let go of Yukinoshita. “And that’s that. We’ll have a study group starting from this week,” she declared loudly.

“...just what do you mean?” Yukinoshita asked dubiously.

Yuigahama completely ignored her question and promptly launched into organising things. “We don’t have club activities one week before the tests, so we’ve got free time in the afternoon, y’know? Oh, Tuesday’s good too, since the teachers have an excursion this week.”

Seriously, an “excursion”? What kind of high school student even says that?

The “excursion” Yuigahama was talking about was a meeting with the city’s education research department, and because it was mandatory for teachers to attend, classes were cut short and club activities took a day off.

Well, I couldn’t say I bought into Yuigahama’s plan. Yukinoshita, the number one ranked student who aspired to enter the science faculty at a public nation-wide university, and I, the number three ranked student in Japanese, would hardly be ruffled before a test. Besides, I had some measure of confidence compared to my moronic little sister and all - my moronic little sister, who couldn’t get any decent marks. Whenever she had a problem she couldn’t work out, I couldn’t care less about helping her out.

If there’s something I hate, it’s having my private time taken away from me. I don’t even attend the celebrations after the athletics festival. N-not because I wasn’t invited or anything! My reason is that I value my time, and it would be quite agonising for me to waste it on someone else.

“Uhhh...” *Hurry up and turn her down already*, I thought to myself, tongue-tied, as Yuigahama went on talking.

“Then we’ll go to Saize in Chiba¹?”

“I don’t really mind...” said Yukinoshita.

¹ The short form of saying ‘Saizeriya’, an Italian chain restaurant popular in Japan.

“Yuigahama, um, you see...” If I didn’t hurry up and say something, they’d actually go through with it! *Stop beating around the bush and turn her down*, I thought. I opened my mouth.

“This is the first time we’re going out together, Yukinon!” Yuigahama interrupted me. “Just the two of us!”

“Indeed,” said Yukinoshita.

...

So I was never invited from the start.

“Hikki, did you say something?” Yuigahama asked.

“N-nah... have fun studying.”

It’s more efficient to study by yourself anyway.

...I didn’t lose, okay.

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

hachiman's mobile

FROM Hachiman 18:29

TITLE Re

World history has a broad scope, so cramming won't help you. There won't be any open-ended questions. Look up the dates and the terminology and memorise them.

FROM Hachiman 18:30

TITLE Re3

Huh? I'm not mad.

FROM Hachiman 18:32

TITLE Re5

What culture is this? Are you Ancient Egyptian? We don't use hieroglyphics here.

FROM Hachiman 18:33

TITLE Re7

That'll be on the test.

yukino's mobile

FROM ☆★Yui★☆☆ 18:21

TITLE nontitle

u did gr8~ ♪(*·ω·)ノ^+.
hav u stdied for the wld histry test yet?! im def gonna fail (>_<)
wot u thnk gonna be on it?? no tim left so i gotta cram... plz tch me!

FROM ☆★Yui★☆☆ 18:21

TITLE Re2

...y so mad, hikki?~
(`·ω·`)?

FROM ☆★Yui★☆☆ 18:31

TITLE Re4

it looks lik ur mad cos u dont use emoticons
(`·ω·`)!

FROM ☆★Yui★☆☆ 18:32

TITLE Re6

wots hieroglyphics (`·ω·`)?



Chapter 2: Hikigaya Komachi Will Marry Her Onii-chan For Sure When She Grows Up (I think)

It was two weeks before the midterms.

A straight-laced male high school student is someone who stops by a family restaurant on the way home just so he can study. I happened to stop by on the day the teachers visited the city education department, which meant school had ended early and club activities were cancelled.

I was doing easy work, just writing out English words over and over. I was like a great Buddhist priest from long ago; you could even say I was like Shinran. Incidentally, Shinran was the person who preached the doctrine of “relying on others to find enlightenment” - he was a great man. Those teachings made a deep impression on me, and so I decided to sponge off somebody too. I thought like a Buddhist so I was totally Shinran.

After some minutes, I finished taking notes and looked around my surroundings as I downed my cocoa. That was when it happened.

“Yukinon, sorry we couldn’t go to Saize,” said a girl. “We’ll have a Milan-style rice pilaf next time, okay? I also recommend the Hamburg steak with vegetable salsa, though...”

“I don’t particularly mind where we go. They all do the same thing,” said another girl. “Come to think of it, is Hamburg steak even Italian cooking, I wonder?”

I heard familiar voices.

“Oh!” one voice exclaimed.

“...ah,” the other voice said.

“Damn,” I groaned.

The three of us saw each other’s faces and gravitated towards each other. What, were we the snake, the frog and the slug¹? I had a feeling I was probably the slug.

The two uniform-clad girls who had walked inside were Yukinoshita Yukino and Yuigahama Yui. To my consternation, I recognised them as my clubmates. (Incidentally, “clubmate” is the word you use to refer to club members in a cultural club, as opposed to “teammate” for a sports club. It was the first time I’d ever tried using the word.)

“Hikki, what are you doing here?” Yuigahama asked.

“Er, uh, studying...”

¹ This is a reference to a Japanese folklore, which many of you probably have familiarity with through *Naruto*. They are all stronger than each other and therefore equal. Snake > Frog > Slug > Snake.

“Ooooh, didn’t expect to see you here. Me and Yukinon were gonna study here a bit... so, um, wanna join in our study group?” Yuigahama said as she looked back and forth between Yukinoshita’s face and mine.

“Yeah, whatever,” I said. “Well, I gotta do the same things you do.”

“...indeed,” said Yukinoshita. “Having you here won’t change much.”

For once, we weren’t biting each other’s heads off. For a moment, Yuigahama cocked her head slightly, dumbfounded at this development, but she put it out of mind with a “kay, it’s decided!” and rushed over to my table.

We helped ourselves to new drinks at the self-serve drink bar, and as we were taking them back to our table, Yukinoshita eyed the unmanned counter fixatedly. She held her cup in her right hand and, for some reason, a small coin in her left. After a pause, she said, “Hey, Hikigaya-kun. Where do you put the money?”

“Huh?”

Was she pulling my leg? Did dearest Yukinoshita-san really not know how a self-serve drink bar works? Just what kind of sheltered upbringing did she have?

“Nah, you don’t need money. It’s just, you know... like a buffet only for beverages?”

“...Japan is quite the bountiful country,” Yukinoshita said with a dark smile on her lips, expressing emotions I didn’t understand. As she spoke, she gave up her position in line for me. And then she watched me earnestly as I filled my drink. The machine let out a hum as the cola poured into my cup, and Yukinoshita watched it all happen with sparkling eyes.

I was speechless. Just to make certain I wasn’t mistaken about what I had just seen, I set my cup under the espresso machine while I was at it. When I pressed the button for cocoa, she let out a quiet, “Oh, so that’s how you do it...”

With a shaky hand, Yukinoshita filled her cup with the drink she wanted, and the three of us returned to our seats together. It was about time for our study meeting to begin.

“’ mokay, let’s start.”

At Yuigahama’s signal, Yukinoshita promptly put her headphones on. I looked at her sideways, and then inserted my earphones.

Yuigahama looked at us with a horrified look on her face. “Huh?! Why are you listening to music?!”

“You see, you’re supposed to listen to music when you’re studying,” I said. “Blocks out the noise.”

“Indeed,” said Yukinoshita. “The fact that I’m concentrating when I’m blocking out noise is excellent proof of its positive effect on my motivation.”

Yuigahama banged her fist on the table. “That’s not how it works! Not at study meetings!” she protested.

At Yuigahama’s reaction, Yukinoshita put a hand on her chin in a gesture of deep thought. “So what do you propose we do at this meeting?” she asked at length.

“Uhhh, work out what’s gonna be on the test, ask questions on what we don’t know... ‘course, we’ll squeeze in some breaks, and afterwards discuss stuff, and then exchange info. And... we’ll chat for a bit, I guess?”

“That’s just talking the whole time...” I said.

It was a study meeting without a single bit of study. Wouldn’t you call that a waste of time?

“Studying has always been a solitary activity in and of itself,” Yukinoshita said, as if realising something. I thought the same way.

In other words, if you’re a loner, studying is well within your capabilities! Yadda yadda. Hey, that's what it says in those manga that advertise home learning courses.

Yuigahama scowled at the idea of studying right from the get-go, but when she saw how intent Yukinoshita and I were on studying silently, she let out a resigned sigh and got to work.

And in that way, five minutes passed, and then ten, and then an hour.

Looking at the two of them, I saw that Yuigahama had her face scrunched up slightly and she kept stopping her hand. Yukinoshita, on the other hand, went on solving maths problems without so much as a murmur.

Eventually, Yuigahama turned her gaze to me and spoke up as if she couldn't handle the intense concentration anymore. "Er, um... so about this question..." she asked blushing, as if her pride couldn't handle the embarrassment of asking me of all people a question.

"The Doppler Effect, huh..." I said. "I don't know much about it since I'm dropping sciences. Now if you were asking about *Baki the Grappler*, I could explain it to you, so is that good enough for you?²"

"That's the last thing I want! Pro wrestling's got nothing to do with anything!"

So it wasn't good enough, huh. And I had so much confidence about my knowledge, too.

² *Baki the Grappler* is a manga series about pro wrestling.

Yuigahama closed her textbook and notebook in resignation and slurped her iced tea through her straw. When she held up her glass and looked around, she let out a gasp as if realising something.

My interest piqued, I looked in the same direction, and standing there was a good-looking girl dressed in a scruffy sailor uniform, who was cute in an unkempt sort of way. "It's my little sister..."

My little sister Komachi was standing in front of the register, smiling cheerfully. Next to her was a boy in a middle school uniform.

"Crap, hang on," I said, standing up from my seat just as they were leaving. But when I got out of the restaurant, the two of them were nowhere to be seen.

Reluctantly, I went back inside, which was when Yuigahama spoke up. "So, uhhh, was that your sister just now?"

"Ugh. Why was *she* with a boy in a family restaurant...?"

I was so shaken I couldn't get back to studying. There was no way my little sister could be hanging around in a family restaurant with a boy I didn't know.

"She might've been on a date!" Yuigahama suggested.

“That’s bull... there’s no way...”

“You really think so? Komachi-chan’s cute so it’s no surprise she’d have a boyfriend, right?”

“I won’t tolerate my little sister having a boyfriend when I don’t have a girlfriend - I’m the older brother here! Little sisters aren’t supposed to outdo their older brothers!”

Yukinoshita took off her headphones and glared at me. “Please stop yelling insipid statements. I heard you even with my headphones on just now.” It was like she was telling me she was holding a grenade pin in her hand. Make one move and you’re dead.

“Er, no. It’s just, to think my little sister is with a mysterious, unidentifiable boy...”

“He was a middle schooler no matter how you look at him,” Yuigahama said. “I get you’re worried about Komachi-chan, but she’ll hate you if you pry on her, ya know? Lately, my dad’s been all like, ‘do you have a boyfriend?’ and it’s a total drag.”

“Hahaha. Your dad’s got no clue! In our family, we trust that my little sister doesn’t have a boyfriend, so no one’s asking her. So seeing all that was a shame, to be honest,” I said. “Come to think of it, how come you know my little sister’s name?”

I'd never told my little sister's name to anyone. Hell, no one even knew *my* name, let alone hers.

"Huh?! Uh, um, er, right... your phone? I'm sure I saw it written there..."
Yuigahama said, looking away for some reason.

Oh, right, now that she mentioned it, I did hand over my phone to her once. She might've seen it inside a text. "That so? That's good. I thought I had become one of those siscons and let her name slip even without realising just how much I love her..."

"Uh, that really is a siscon reaction, I think..." Yuigahama said, half recoiling from me.

"Impossible! I am certainly no siscon. In fact, to me, she is not my sister, just another girl... argh, that was a joke of course. Quit looking at me like that."

With her knife and fork in hand, Yukinoshita looked at me, utterly speechless with a mixture of horror and disgust in her eyes. She had been unmistakeably thinking of stabbing and cutting at my raw flesh right up until I finished speaking.

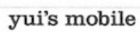
"It's scary that I can't tell whether you're joking when you say that," she remarked. After a pause, she went on, "If you're so curious, why don't you ask her at home?"

Having stated their final words on the matter, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama returned to studying.

But my hand was unmoving because the whole time I got flashbacks of Komachi calling me “onii-chan”, followed by, “I’ll gonna marry onii-chan for sure when I grow up!” and the stern disapproval of my father from then on.

Whatever, who really gives a crap about little sisters?

And so I didn’t ask her anything when I got home. I-it wasn’t like I thought she’d hate me if I pried on her or anything!



20:22

yukinon u did gr8 2day!
 ~ ! \ (° · ω ·) / ~
 thx for tchin me difrence
 difrence eqations ♪ lets
 go 2 saize agen!! italan
 milky gelato is ridic
 yummy *° (° * ∩ `) ° *°

21:37

but i mightve orderd coffee
jelly on top v(>w<*)
omg yukinon u take ages 2 reply!!

21:49

those hroglyph again! $\Sigma(\cdot \square \cdot)$ is it a fad? ($\cdot \omega \cdot$)?

21:36

Indeed, I look forward to it.

21:47

I am not accustomed to texting. It hardly matters either way, but is that hieroglyph-like symbol from your earlier message hitting something with its hand?

21:59

It went out of fashion
around 1900 years ago.



Chapter 3: Hayama Hayato Is Always Behind Everything

It was break time, but I could never catch a break.

The classroom buzzed with chatter. Everyone and their dog had been released from the shackles of schoolwork, and now they were all talking familiarly with their friends about their plans after school and what they watched on TV, yadda yadda yadda. Their words went in one ear and out the other. Their conversations could have been in a foreign language based on what I understood of them. I might as well have not been there at all.

I got the feeling that today the chatter was even livelier than usual. In all likelihood, it was because the teacher in charge of homeroom had announced that we'd be picking our own groups for the "workplace tour". Even though there would be a longer homeroom than usual the day after tomorrow to decide the groups and where they'd be going, my classmates were one step ahead. The conversations weren't so much along the lines of "where are you going?" as it was "who are you going with?" Nearly everyone in the class was making special plans to be with who they wanted.

That much was obvious. School wasn't just a place where you took classes. At its heart, it's a microcosm of society, a miniature garden populated by every type of human being on this earth. And so in high school people have their wars and disputes through the form of bullying, and just like any stratified society high school has a clear social hierarchy. Of course, since it's a democracy, the theory of strength in numbers applies too. The majority - and those with the majority of friends - rule.

I watched the behaviour of my classmates with my chin resting on my hands and my eyes half-closed. I'd had enough sleep lately and it wasn't like I was tired or anything, but because I spent my lunch breaks like this ever since I was small, sleeping was a conditioned reflex for me.

As my line of sight dimmed and I was nodding off, I was shaken awake by a small pair of hands. When I lifted my face blearily, Totsuka Saika was sitting on the seat in front of me.

“Morning,” Totsuka greeted me with a small smile.

I stirred.

“...please make breakfast for me every morning.”

“H-huh?! What are you...?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just half-asleep.”

Holy crap, I proposed to him without thinking. Shit, why was he so excessively cute? But he's a guy! A guy! A guy? ...not that he would make breakfast for me every morning anyway.

There was silence for a moment. “So what's up?” I asked.

“Nothing much...” he replied. “I just thought I’d say hello since you were there, Hikigaya-kun... was I getting in your way?”

“Nah, not in the least. Actually, I’d love for you to talk to me for four-to-six hours a day.” On that note, I would love for him to tell me that he loved me for four-to-six hours a day.

“In that case, I’d have to be with you all the time, you know?” Totsuka laughed cutely, putting a hand over his mouth. And then, as if realising something, he clapped his hands together and scrunched his eyes shut in request. “Hikigaya-kun, have you decided where you’re going for the workplace tour yet?”

“What will be, will be and won’t be, won’t be,” I said.

Perplexed by what I said, Totsuka peered down at my face and cocked his head slightly. I caught a fleeting glance of the space between the collar of his gym clothes and his collarbone and turned my gaze away inadvertently. How could he have such beautiful skin? What kind of body soap was he using?

“Ahh, basically what I mean is that I don’t care where I go,” I answered. “Anywhere besides my home is all the same to me. Equally worthless.”

“Oooh, sometimes you say such big words, Hikigaya-kun.” I don’t recall saying a single difficult word, but Totsuka made a sound of amazement, as if my words had made a deep impression on him.

I had a feeling Totsuka could blow raspberries and my affection levels for him would increase. But the fact that he was the kind of character who could raise your affection levels no matter what he said was frightening in a way. I was on the verge of going down the route which must not be named.

“So... you’ve already decided who you’re going with, huh?” Totsuka Saika peered into my eyes hesitantly, but with unmistakable insistence.

I had no idea what to make of what he had said. His words seemed to have a kind of *“I want to go with you but since you’ve already decided, what a shame, huh?”* vibe to it.

That was enough to put me on guard.

Totsuka’s surprise attack violently shook the door to my memories open. Indeed, something like this had happened a long time ago, too...

You see, when I was a wee 8th grader and I was forced to be the class representative, the other candidate was a cute girl who smiled at me and said, *“Let’s do our best this year”*...

Uuuurk! Crap! Once again, I’d almost been fooled by those *completely* incomprehensible words. I wasn’t about to get hurt again.

I've already lived through it all once. A practiced loner is once bitten, twice shy. Confessions of love as penalty for losing at rock-paper-scissors, fake love letters written by boys who copy down what girls dictate to them - I want nothing to do with them. I'm a veteran of war. There's no one better at losing than I am.

Okay. Calm down. At times like this, just use Mirror Move - it takes the least amount of effort. Basically, Fe@row is a loner among loners for sure.

So I answered a question with a question.

"Have you decided who you're going with?"

"M-me?" Dumbfounded at having his own question thrown back at him, Totsuka's cheeks went red. "I've, um, already decided." He covered his eyes slightly and peeped at me sideways for my reaction.

Meh, that's life, I guess. Totsuka was a tennis club member, which basically meant he had his own special community he belonged to and it was inevitable that he would have connections. It was obvious he would have friends in this class.

I, on the other hand, had joined a club that was an isolation ward for the school's misfits, so there was no way I could make friends.

"When I think about it - actually, I don't even need to think about it - I don't have any male friends."

“Er, uh... Hikigaya-kun...” Totsuka said in a small voice. “I’m male, you know...”

He was so cute, I couldn’t hear him properly.

But anyway, it was a bizarre feeling to even talk to someone in the classroom. Ever since that whole thing with the tennis club, people said maybe two or three words to me when they saw me. When all’s said and done, could I really call them friends? I doubted it. If it was small talk of that level, it didn’t matter whether we knew each other - we could be complete strangers for all it mattered. For example, when you’re lining up for ramen, you might have a conversation like, “Crowded, huh?” “I’m sick of lining up every day.” But you wouldn’t call them a friend.

This is what friends are like:

“Hayato-kun, you decided where you’re gonna go?”

“I’m thinking about somewhere related to media or a multinational corporation.”

“Whoa, man, you’re on the ball. Hayato, you’re like superman or something. But we’re at that age, ya know? I got mad respect for my parents these days.”

“We gotta knuckle down from now on, eh?”

“You said it, bro. But don’t forget we’re all kids at heart.”

Isn’t that the kind of vibe friends have? Being friends was possibly about being able to talk to each other without a care in the world. I’d burst out laughing halfway through, so friendship was completely impossible for me. What was that crap about respecting your parents? Did that guy think he was some rapper?

Hayama Hayato was surrounded by three guys and he was beaming, just like he usually did. Pretty much everyone was happy to call him Hayato, and Hayama was willing to call them by their first names too. That one act of “friendship” was an appropriately heartwarming scene.

But I could see they were just pretending to feel each other’s friendship by calling each other by first name. Calling people by first name was something that happened in dramas, manga and anime. Their performance was just as scripted. They just wanted to suck up to each other.

…but no harm in trying a little myself, right? It would be an experience. (I’ve got nothing against manga I haven’t read, just the people who draw it. If I tried reading it and it sucked, I’d punch the artist with every ounce of strength in my body, though.)

The experiment: would calling someone by their first name change your relationship with them?

“Saika.”

When I called out Totsuka's name, Totsuka said nothing. He stiffened. His eyes went wide and he blinked two or three times, his mouth agape.

See what I mean? It doesn't make you get along any better. Usually, calling someone by their first name when you haven't earned the intimacy would just piss them off. Like, when Zaimokuza called me 'Hachiman', I blatantly ignored him. What I'm trying to say is that when those riajuu pigs (HA!) do all that, they lie and pretend they're not mad.

I figured I should probably apologise to Totsuka for now. "Ah, sorry about just now..."

"...I'm so happy. It's the first time you've called me by my first name."

"I just... what...?"



Totsuka smiled broadly at me, his eyes somewhat clouded with deep emotion. What the hell? Was I starting to live a fulfilling life? God bless riajuu (my saviours!). The scales had fallen from my eyes.

Totsuka looked up at me and cleared his throat. "So, um... can I call you Hikki?"

"No way in hell."

No, just no. Right now, there was only one person calling me by that highly revolting nickname, and if it caught on I'd be screwed. Seeing how I refused to budge, Totsuka looked somewhat disappointed for a moment, but then he cleared his throat and tried again. "What about... Hachiman?"

...

DING DING DING!

The noise resounded in my ears.

"S-say that again!"

Totsuka smiled vaguely, perplexed at my nonsensical request. He looked cute even when he was troubled - except I was the one in trouble.

“...Hachiman,” he said shyly, watching for my reaction between his fingers.

“Hachiman?” he said questioningly, tilting his head slightly.

“Hachiman! Are you listening to me?” he said crossly, puffing out his cheeks.

Seeing Totsuka’s slightly angered expression was enough to bring me back to my senses. Oh crap, I’d let myself get entranced by his extreme cuteness without thinking...

“Uh, uhhhh. Sorry. What were we saying again?” I pretended I was spaced out, but actually I was writing a mental note about the results of my experiment.

Conclusion: Totsuka is so cute when you call him by his first name.

3-2

It's always evening by the time the tumult on the school grounds quietens down. From this room, one could see the last rays of the sun as it descended into the Tokyo bay, giving way to the darkness lurking in the high and distant sky.

“Ohhh... so the hour of darkness has arrived, huh...?” the young man whispered as he curled his hand into a fist. As he did so, the synthetic leather armlet he was wearing made a slight tightening sound. Staring fixedly at the 1kg wrist weights through his sleeve, he let out a sigh. “The time to break the seal has come...”

Not a single voice responded to those words.

...even though there were three other people in the room.

The one who looked at the three of us in turn, obviously expecting us to say something, was Zaimokuza Yoshiteru. And the one who utterly ignored him and went on reading with silent contempt was Yukinoshita Yukino. The one who stuttered bewilderedly as she looked at me and Yukinoshita with silent pleas for help was Yuigahama Yui.

“So what do you want, Zaimokuza?” I asked him, to which Yukinoshita sighed deeply. Then she glared sharply at me. “*You were supposed to ignore him...*” her eyes seemed to say.

Yeah, but someone had to do it.

I didn't actually want to talk to him, but he'd been yabbering on for about half an hour. What, was this the infamous "But Thou Must" moment in *Dragon Quest V*¹? If I didn't talk to him here, he'd keep on yabbering forever.

As soon as I asked him my question, Zaimokuza rubbed the tip of his nose happily and laughed as if he was really flattered. Man, this guy was annoying as hell.

“Ah, my apologies. A good phrase just came to me, so I just had to say it out loud to get its rhythm and feel. Oho, indeed I am a writer to my very core... I think about my novel when I'm awake and when I'm asleep. Such is the fate of a writer...”

Yuigahama and I exchanged tired looks at Zaimokuza's pretentious way of speaking. Yukinoshita snapped her book shut. Zaimokuza flinched in reaction.

“I thought a writer was someone who actually created something...” Yukinoshita said. “So you've written something, I take it?”

Zaimokuza's whole body recoiled and he made a garbled sound like his throat was clogged. Both of his reactions were annoying as hell. But strangely enough, Zaimokuza had stronger nerves than usual today. He was back on his feet immediately, coughing exaggeratedly.

¹ <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ButThouMust>

“...ahem. That’s only true for today... for I have finally obtained my desire. I’m on the road to El Dorado!”

“What, did you win the prize?” I asked.

“N-no, not yet... h-however, it’s only a matter of time!” Zaimokuza declared cockily, acting all high and mighty for some reason.

Uh huh. So just what part of what he said was worth bragging over? If he could say that, then clearly the game I have yet to complete with my RPG Maker skills will change the Japanese gaming industry forever.

Zaimokuza threw his coat back with a flourish. “Hahaha, listen and be amazed!” he shouted with renewed vigour. “On this occasion, I have decided to venture forth to a publisher for my workplace tour! In other words - you get it, don’t you?”

“Nope, not a clue...”

“What poor judgment, Hachiman. In other words, it is time for my talent to be recognised. I’m making connections.”

“Hey, don’t let it get to your head.” I paused. “I swear, you’re like a kid who hangs around a delinquent senpai. You’re even worse than a chuuni at restraining yourself.”

Zaimokuza proceeded to ignore everything I said and grinned vacantly at nothing in particular. It was honestly creepy how he mumbled, “The studio will be... the casting will be...” to himself. And besides, there were a whole lot of crap publishers too. If he believed his future was so bright, then there was nothing more I could say to him.

Still, there was something strange about all of this. “Zaimokuza, I’m amazed your group listened to your opinion.”

“What? You’re making me out to be a weakling... well, whatever. On this occasion I just happened to encounter two other so-called otaku. I didn’t even say I wanted to go to a publisher and it turned out they wanted to go too. They were giggling and cackling and whatnot. I’m quite sure they were into that recent BL fad. Love conquers all, and so I said nothing to object.”

Yuigahama refused to look at Zaimokuza’s face. “You should’ve partnered with someone the same type as you...” she said, sighing.

But Zaimokuza was too far gone. There were some things he refused to concede *because* he was among people with the same hobby. It was like a religious war, I guess.

“I see, it’s the workplace tour, huh...” Yuigahama uttered with deep emotion. And then she glanced at me sideways before immediately looking away. Her eyes were watery like she’d just gotten out of a pool and her face looked rather red. Did she have a cold? “Um, Hikki, where are you going?” she asked me hesitantly.

“My house.”

“Yeah, no,” Yuigahama said with a wave of her hand.

I still wasn’t ready to give up on this, but since I didn’t want Hiratsuka-sensei to beat me up I decided to let it go. I’d resigned so the match was adjourned.

“Hmph, well, I’ll go where the other guys in my group want to go.”

“Wow, you’re not gonna choose for yourself?”

“Nah... I did in the past, but I ended up being a pain, so I lost my right to speak.”

“I see now - oh, wait. *Oh.*” As usual, she had stepped on a landmine. Yuigahama was probably crap at Minesweeper. “Sorry.”

That reminded me of something, come to think of it. Actually, “make a group of three” is a more horrible instruction than “make a group of two”. If it was just the two of you, you could resign yourself and not say anything. But if it was a group of three and the other two got chummy and spoke to each other, then you’d feel completely out of the loop.

“So, in the end you never decided...?” Yuigahama murmured with a look of deep contemplation on her face.

“Have you decided where to go, Yuigahama-san?” Yukinoshita asked.

“Yeah. The closest place.”

“That’s a Hikigaya-kun level of thinking...”

“Don’t lump me in that group,” I said. “I wanted to go to my house out of my strong conviction. Anyway, where are *you* going? To the police? A courtroom? Or maybe a prison?”

“Wrong,” Yukinoshita chuckled coldly. “You seem to know how I think.”

Ufufu.

See what I mean? Her laugh was creepy.

As far as things went, Yukinoshita was morbidly intellectual, but only when she really didn’t like you. How strange, she didn’t actually *want* to say only cruel and cold-hearted and inhumane things. *Ufufu*. What was with that oh-so-innocent laugh?

“I think I’ll go to a think tank somewhere - a research institution. I’ll choose from there.”

The fact that Yukinoshita had already worked out what she wanted to do exemplified her tendency towards quick decision-making. At any rate, it was easy to be reminded of how serious she was from how cool her attitude was.

Someone kept pulling on the sleeve of my blazer, snapping me out of my reverie. *What do you think you're doing, you punk?* I thought, swinging around.

It was Yuigahama. She had brought her face close to mine without my knowledge. She smelt ridiculously good, and her glossy hair brushed against my nape. It was the first time I'd ever felt so physically close to Yuigahama. Much to my annoyance, my heart started beating erratically.

"H-Hikki..." she breathed against my ear with a sweet-sounding sigh. It was enough to make my ear unbearably itchy.

From our distance, we could hear the sound of our heartbeats. Could it be... no wait... was it possible that the throbbing I could hear from her chest was...?

"What's a thinkie tank? Is that a society of tanks?" She pronounced the word like an old woman would.

So as it turned out, her frantic heartbeat was just an arrhythmia or something.

“...Yuigahama-san,” Yukinoshita said with an exasperated sigh. As Yuigahama pulled away from me, Yukinoshita launched into her explanation. “You see, a think tank is-”

Yuigahama nodded eagerly to show she was paying attention. The two of them were easing into an impromptu study session. Watching them through the corner of my eyes, I embarked on the terribly important business of reading shojo manga again. By the time Yukinoshita had finished explaining to Yuigahama what a think tank was along with related details, fifteen whole minutes had passed.

The evening sun was close to the sea. From our room, I could see the surface of the sea sparkling in the distance. The fourth floor view provided a view of the baseball club sweeping the grounds, the soccer club carrying the goals, and the track and field club packing away the hurdles and mats and so on.

It was about time for club activities to finish for the day. At the same time my eyes drifted towards the clock, Yukinoshita snapped her book shut. Incidentally, Zaimokuza flinched as soon as Yukinoshita made a move. Man, was this guy easily frightened.

I don't know just how it came about since no one actually decided on this, but Yukinoshita closing her book was the unspoken signal for club activities to end. With brisk, consummate ease, Yuigahama and I also started preparing to go home.

In the end, no one came to our club asking for help today either. For some reason, the only person who came was Zaimokuza, and we really didn't want him here.

I wondered if I should have ramen on the way home...

When I thought about dinner, the vague idea that Horaiken might be good came into my head. It was a ramen store in Niigata, but the soup there was easily the best soup I've ever had. Zaimokuza told me about it. Oh crap, I was drooling, heh.

All of a sudden, I heard a short, rhythmical rap on the door. "Who's knocking at *this* hour...?" Now that my blissful ramen time was interrupted, I glared at the clock sourly.

I had a habit of pretending not to be at home whenever this happened at my own house. When I looked quizzically in Yukinoshita's direction asking for what to do, she said, "Come in." She didn't even look at me at all as she uttered her reply.

Our visitors didn't read the atmosphere either, but when it came to misreading the atmosphere, Yukinoshita was second to none. She'd probably win every time.

"Sorry for intruding." It was a cool male voice, the sound of which would instantly put you at ease. So this was the guy who stole my ramen away from me...

I glared irately at the door, only to be greeted with a genuine surprise. It was someone whom I would never have dreamed would come into this room.

3-3

It was a pretty boy of all people. He was so pretty you couldn't call him a mere "pretty boy" anymore.

His brown hair was loosely styled as a perm. Without any self-consciousness, he peered straight at me through the trendy frames of his trendy glasses, and for some reason he grinned when our eyes met¹. Without thinking at all, I forced a grin in return. He was so much of a pretty boy that I instinctually bowed down to him.

"Sorry about the bad timing. I've got a bit of a request for you." Putting his Umbro enamel bag down on the floor with an extremely natural "Is here okay?", he pulled up a seat facing Yukinoshita. Everything he did exuded easy-going charm. "Man, I had a hard time getting my club to let me go. Club activities are postponed before exams, so I figured I had to come see you today no matter what. Sorry."

People who need something are like that. He didn't even notice I was about to go home to freedom. That's why I'm a ninja, I guess.

He said club activities were hectic, but our club had done jack and there was no trace of body odour in the room. In its place, a certain refreshing scent of lime drifted through the air.

¹ Weirdly enough, this description doesn't match how Hayama looks in the anime or in the later volumes of the LN. Hm. So Hayama was originally designed as a megane character? Interesting.

“Enough,” Yukinoshita said flatly, cutting off the boy’s cheerful chatter. I got the feeling she was acting somewhat sharper than usual. “You came here because you wanted something, did you not? Hayama Hayato-kun.”

Yukinoshita’s frigid tone did nothing to shake Hayama Hayato’s smile. “Ah, you’re right. You call this the Service Club, don’t you? Hiratsuka-sensei told me that I should go here if I needed advice, so...”

Every time Hayama spoke, a refreshing breeze blew through the window for some reason. Geez, did he have control over the wind or something?

“Sorry about the bad timing. If you, Yui and the others have plans, I’ll come again another time...”

Upon hearing her name, Yuigahama let out a strained smile. It seemed that even people higher up on the social ladder than I was couldn’t escape from Hayama’s contact. “No big deal. I don’t mind at all. You’re the next captain of the soccer club, Hayato-kun. It’s no wonder you took so long coming here!”

But the only one who thought that way was Yuigahama. Yukinoshita was unimpressed, while Zaimokuza sat silently with a stern, imposing look on his face.

“Ahh, I should say sorry to you as well, Zaimokuza-kun,” Hayama said.

“Huh?! A-ahem! Er, I don’t really mind myself, uhh, I better get going now...”

And just by opening his mouth, Hayama promptly dispelled the hostile atmosphere. After Hayama did his handiwork, it was as if *Zaimokuza* was the one who had done something wrong.

Zaimokuza coughed exaggeratedly. “H-Hachiman, see you later!” he said hastily, and then he actually did go. But even as he was running away, a smile was spreading across his face.

…I understood how he felt so much it hurt.

I honestly don’t know why this is, but high school outcasts like me shrink in contact from the popular kids. We always make room for them in the hallway, and when they speak to us, we stumble over our words eighty per cent of the time. And it wasn’t even like we were jealous or that we hated on them. On the days they remembered our names, we’d feel kind of happy.

Guys like Hayama knew my name and who I was. Knowing that made me regain some of my dignity.

“You too, Hikitan-kun,” said Hayama. “Sorry I’m taking up your time.”

“…gah, never mind.”

He only got *my* name wrong! Alas, my poor dignity.

“Yeah, so whaddaya want?” I blurted out irately, not because I was subconsciously channelling my rage at having my name mistaken or anything.

...no, really! I had a genuine interest in Hayama’s problems. It’s honestly hard to imagine that such a popular, widely-loved guy would have any problems. By no means did I have any ulterior motives like wanting to know his weak point so I could make fun of him.

“Ah. Well, about that,” Hayama said, slowly taking out his cell phone. Pressing the buttons nimbly, he accessed the text messages and showed me the screen.

Beside me, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama craned their necks to peer at the screen. With three people crowded around a screen the size of your palm, I got dizzy. The two of them smelled nice. But as soon as I cleared off to let the two of them watch the screen in peace, Yuigahama let out a soft, “Ah...”

“What happened?” I asked. Yuigahama took out her own cell phone and showed me. Her text had the exact same message as the one from before.

You could say it was filled with objectionable content. And it wasn’t just one text either. Every time Yuigahama moved her fingertip, she scrolled through a whole laundry list of spiteful words with no end in sight. *Were they all spam accounts?* I wondered. The texts from every single address were solely dedicated to badmouthing individuals.

Like, *“Tobe belongs to a gang that hangs around at the arcade picking on people from West High.”*

Or, *“Yamato is a three-timing douchebag.”*

And even, *“Ooka played roughly at a practice match just to take out the other school’s ace player.”*

The overall vibe I got was that these texts of dubious authenticity just went on and on. And besides the original source, which was a spam address, the messages were being forwarded by classmates. “Hey, this is...”

Yuigahama nodded wordlessly. “I mentioned it yesterday, y’know? That it was going round our class...”

“Chain messages, I see,” Yukinoshita, who had been silent up until now, intoned.

As the name suggests, a chain message is a kind of text that goes around like a chain. At around the end or so, there would be a prompt to “pass this on to five people” or something like that. They’re like the “cursed letters” of the olden days: *“If you don’t pass this on to five people in three days, you’ll get cursed”*, blah blah. It was pretty much that brand of text.

As he looked over the texts again, Hayama smiled bitterly. “Ever since these started circulating, the atmosphere in class has been getting more and more strained. Plus, I’m mad since those are my friends they’re talking about.”

At that moment, Hayama’s expression was like Yui’s from before; he was fed up with the bad intentions of those who wouldn’t show their faces.

There’s nothing as horrible as an evil whose face you can’t see. If someone insults you to your face, you can insult them right back. Or you can channel your pent-up anger and stress towards other things. Such heavy emotions are a major source of energy, which you can use for positive things. But when those feelings of anger, envy and pettiness aren’t directed at you, you can’t muster any strong emotion. You can only feel vaguely uneasy.

“I want to stop it. It really doesn’t sit right with me, after all,” Hayama insisted, before adding cheerfully, “Oh, but I don’t want to turn this into a witch hunt. I want to know how to solve things peacefully. I’m wondering if you could help me out.”

There it was. Hayama had just unleashed his killer ability: “The Zone”.

Allow me to explain. “The Zone” is a unique skill only the truest of riajuu possess, and its main feature was the ability to control one’s surroundings. Unlike those shallow riajuu (HA!) who hang around and show off to their idiotic peers, true riajuu are genuinely satisfied with the real world. Because of that, they didn’t look down on anyone - they’re *nice* to people who are looked down upon. My basis for deciding between the two types of riajuu is “Are you nice to Hikigaya Hachiman?”

Hayama's a nice guy, I think. I mean, he talks to me, you know? (Even though he got my name wrong.)

To sum up, you could call "The Zone" the unique aura only nice, charismatic people have. If I were being nice, I'd say they're nice people who can read the atmosphere, but if I were to say it like it is, they just don't have their own opinions. If I were being an asshole, I'd say they're cowardly trash. Well, I do think they're good people, though.

In the face of Hayama's special ability, Yukinoshita scratched her chin in thought for a while, and then she opened her mouth. "So basically, you want us to set the record straight?"

"Mmm, pretty much."

"Then we must find the culprit," Yukinoshita declared.

3-4

“Sure, I’ll leave it to y-” Hayama began blithely until the shock registered on his face. “Huh?!”

Yet within a moment, he regained his composure and smiled.

“Ahem, why do you need to do that?” he asked Yukinoshita calmly.

At that, Yukinoshita, whose cold expression was the complete antithesis of Hayama’s, began to speak slowly, as if carefully choosing her words.

“Sending chain messages... that is a despicable act that tramples over a person’s dignity. While they hide in the shadow of anonymity, they slander others for the sole purpose of damaging them. Spreading the slanderous words is no less of an evil thing to do. Healthy curiosity is one thing, but to continue spreading slanderous words... unless you eradicate the root cause, there won’t be any results. Source: me.”

“Is that from personal experience...?” I asked.

I wish she’d quit it with the loaded statements. Yukinoshita spoke calmly, but I could see a black fire flickering underneath her veneer. You might say she was exuding an evil aura.



“Really, I wonder what’s so amusing about spreading messages to show contempt for someone. And I do not think there is any merit in what Sagawa-san or Shimoda-san did...”

“So you took care of them all...” Yuigahama said with a rather strained smile.

It was stuff like this that affirmed how resourceful Yukinoshita was and how frightening she would be as an enemy.

“Man, your middle school sure was hip and up with the times,” I remarked.
“Nothing like that happened at my school.”

“...that’s because nobody asked you for your phone address.”

“Why, you! Fool! I have a duty to be confidential! Don’t you know the Personal Information Protection Act?!”

“That’s an original legal interpretation...” an astonished Yukinoshita remarked as she flicked her hair over her shoulder.

But yeah, the reason I wasn’t so involved with this texting drama was probably what she said. I had never been asked for my phone address. That was where Yukinoshita and I were different. She’d been exposed to outright hate while I hadn’t. Somehow, I suspect that if that had happened to me, I wouldn’t have found the culprit. I would have gone straight home and cried in my pillow.

“In any case, a person who commits such a despicable deed undoubtedly deserves to be eradicated,” Yukinoshita went on. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth - vengeance is my creed.”

Yuigahama reacted as if she had heard that phrase somewhere before. “Oh, we learned that in world history today! That’s from the *Magna Carta*, right?”

“It’s Hammurabi’s Code,” Yukinoshita answered smoothly, before turning to Hayama. “I’ll look for the culprit. I believe all it will take for them to stop is for me to have a word with them. I’ll leave everything that follows to your discretion. Or is that not to your liking?”

“...uh, that’s fine,” Hayama said resignedly.

Actually, I thought the same way as Yukinoshita did. If the culprit went to the effort of changing their phone address, it was because they didn’t want their true identity to be known and were afraid of being found out. In that case, they would probably stop the moment their cover was blown. Basically, finding the culprit was the quickest way of finishing things.

Yukinoshita stared closely at the cell phone Yuigahama had placed on the desk. Then she put a hand on her chin in contemplation. “When did the messages start circulating?”

“Last weekend. Right, Yui?” Hayama answered, and Yuigahama nodded.

...hey now, Hayama. You just called Yuigahama by her first name. I didn't know how these popular kids could go around casually calling girls by their first names. If it was me, I'd definitely be stumbling over myself. The fact that Hayama could utter such embarrassing phony things while still being respectful made me kind of mad. What, was he an American or something?

"So it suddenly started last week, I see," Yukinoshita mused. "Yuigahama-san, Hayama-kun, did something happen in class last week?"

"Nothing comes to mind," said Hayama.

"Yeah..." said Yui. "It was just like normal."

The two of them looked at each other.

"I'll ask you just to be thorough, Hikigaya-kun," said Yukinoshita. "Did you notice anything?"

" 'Just to be thorough', you say..."

I was in the same class, thank you very much. But well, since I was watching from a different place from those two, there were things only I might notice.

...so last week, huh? That meant something happened recently. *Something that happened recently, something that happened recently*, I kept thinking to myself, but nothing quite came to mind.

For now, I contented myself with the memory of calling Totsuka by his first name. That did happen yesterday.

*Saika
So cute
It took courage
To call him Saika
Yesterday¹*

Oh yeah, why *was* I talking with Totsuka yesterday? As soon as I thought that, I remembered.

“It was yesterday. People were talking about their groups for the workplace tour.” (Right, and as a logical extension of that thought, Totsuka was cute.)

As soon as I uttered that, Yuigahama came to an abrupt realisation. “Ooooh, that’s it. It’s because of the groups.”

“*Huh? Really?*” Hayama and I said in unison. At that, Hayama flashed me a smile and said, “We’re in synch,” although I seriously didn’t give a crap. All I could say was, “Uh, yeah...”

¹ The Japanese was a [tanka](#), but I decided to translate it into a [cinquain](#) because it was easier to get the timing of the syllables right.

But paradoxically, Hayama plus Hachiman equals Pretty Boy Riajuu. QED. End of proof. (...did that even add up?)

Hayama turned his gaze towards Yuigahama. When he did, Yuigahama laughed sheepishly. “Er, you see, when you make a group for this kind of event, it affects your relationships afterwards. Some people take it really personally...”

Hayama and Yukinoshita looked at the slightly gloomy Yuigahama with puzzlement. Hayama had never been excluded and Yukinoshita had no interest in such things, so neither of them understood.

But I knew what Yuigahama meant. It was *because* those words came from Yuigahama, who paid attention to others and accepted them all for their bizarre and complicated ways, that I could believe them.

Yukinoshita coughed to get the conversation back on track. “Hayama-kun, those messages were written about your friends, you said. Who are you grouping with?”

“Oh, uhhhh... now that you mention it, I haven’t decided yet. I guess I’ll end up going with someone out of those three.”

“I think I know who did it now...” Yuigahama said with a somewhat dejected expression.

“Mind giving us an explanation?” Yukinoshita asked.

“Mmm, well you see, basically, someone who’s usually in the group is gonna get excluded, y’know? Only one person from a group of four is gonna get left out. And that person is gonna be super bitter about it.” Her voice quivered with emotion.

At that, everyone fell into silence.

If we were going to apprehend the culprit, then first we needed to think about their motive. If we could find out just what would make them resort to such an action, then we could naturally deal with them.

Thinking about it in this case, it was probably so that they wouldn’t get left out. In our class, Hayama was part of a group of four boys. Therefore, if they had to make a group of three, someone would miss out. Not wanting that to happen, they had no choice but to kick someone out. That was probably what the culprit was thinking.

“…so there’s no doubt the culprit is among the three of them.”

As soon as Yukinoshita stated that conclusion, Hayama let out a rare outburst. “Hang on a sec! I don’t want to think the culprit is among them. And don’t the texts say bad things about all three of them? It can’t be one of them.”

“Huh, are you retarded? Were you born yesterday or something?” I said. “It’s obvious they did that so no one would suspect them. If it were me, I would’ve avoided slandering one of them on purpose to frame them.”

“Hikki, that’s really horrible...” said Yuigahama.

It’s a white-collar crime. A white-collar crime, I say.

Hayama bit his lip in vexation. He had probably never imagined something like this before: that there was hatred right under his nose, or that dark emotions were swirling underneath the smiling veneer of those whom he trusted.

3-5

“For now, could you tell us what you know about those three?” Yukinoshita probed Hayama for information.

At that, Hayama looked up with resolve brimming on his face. His belief in his friends remained in his eyes. He probably held on to the lofty belief that he could clear up the suspicion that had been cast on his friends.

“Tobe’s in the same soccer club as me. His bleached hair might make him look like a bad guy, but he’s the best at getting everyone energised. He always gets involved at the school festival and the sports festival. A nice guy.”

“An easily excited person whose only talent is making noise, I see,” Yukinoshita declared.

Silence. Hayama was lost for words.

“Hm? What’s wrong? Go on.” Yukinoshita gave Hayama a strange look for falling into silence so suddenly.

Regaining his momentum, Hayama launched into his next character description. “Yamato’s in the rugby club. He’s calm and good at listening. He’s a chill guy who puts people at ease by not saying much, I guess? He’s the silent, caring type. A nice guy.”

“So not only is he slow, he’s incapable of making his own decisions... right.”

Incapable of mustering any words, Hayama scowled in silence, but then with a resigned sigh, he continued. “Ooka’s in the baseball club. He’s easy to get along with and he’s always helping other people out. He’s always polite and respectful to his elders and his juniors. A nice guy.”

“An opportunist who worries about his reputation, then.”

Hayama wasn’t the only one who had been speechless this whole time. Yuigahama and I both opened our mouths vacantly, but no words came out.

Yukinoshita demolished them. As I expected, she was born to be a prosecutor.

But the horrifying thing about this girl was that she was not necessarily incorrect about her character judgments. There were countless different ways one could read a person’s character. Hayama always insisted on seeing the good in people, and on that count he was biased. Meanwhile, Yukinoshita rejected such interpretations and so naturally she was harsh. Her problem was that she was *too* harsh. She’d make Clint Eastwood break down in tears.

Yukinoshita peered at the memo she wrote and groaned. “It wouldn’t be strange for any of these people to be the culprit.”

“Isn’t that because you’re the one who thinks the most like a criminal?”

She could see the bad in anyone from just a tiny amount of evidence. In a sense, she was more horrible than the person who wrote the text messages.

Yukinoshita put her hands on her hips with exaggerated fury, but she had an even angrier look on her face. “There is absolutely no way I would do that. If I were doing it, I’d crush my enemy face-to-face.”

The means were different, but this girl didn’t realise that “crushing your enemy” amounted to the same thing. How very like Yukinoshita not to state the peaceful solution.

Hayama smiled at Yukinoshita with an expression that was angry and regretful and anxious all at once. Yukinoshita had her ways, but Hayama had his ways too. In the end, he could only see her words as trash-talking. He was a good guy, but his point of view differed too much from ours and he didn’t want to rat out his friends.

Yukinoshita seemed to realise this too. “Hayama’s descriptions aren’t much to go on... Yuigahama-san, Hikigaya-kun.” She turned her inquisitive gaze on us. “What do you think of those boys?”

“Er, th-there’s not much to say...” Yuigahama said.

“I don’t really know those guys,” I said.

On that note, I didn't really know anyone in the entire school. I didn't have any friends and my number of acquaintances was quite small. *Yep, that's me.*

"Then could you look into them for me?" Yukinoshita said to Yuigahama. "The groups are being decided the day after tomorrow, correct? We have one day to figure it out."

"...um, okay." A slightly uncomfortable expression came upon Yuigahama's face.

I suppose for Yuigahama, who was trying to get along with everyone in her class, this wasn't an action she was inclined to undertake. You had to be exposed to the very people whose faults you were out to expose. It was a relatively risky action for someone who was part of the community.

Yukinoshita seemed to realise that too because she lowered her eyes gently.

"...sorry, it's not a terribly pleasant thing to do. Please put it out of mind," she insisted.

When she put it like that, anyone would say they'd do it though. Well, *that* much was obvious.

"I'll do it. I don't really care what my classmates think of me," I said, which caused Yukinoshita to glance at me.

She smiled thinly. "I'm not holding my breath."

“Leave it to me. Finding faults in people is one of my 108 special skills.” As for my other special skills, they include cat’s cradle. I’m pretty much Nobit@-kun¹.

“H-hang on! I’ll do it too! I-I just can’t let Hikki handle it on his own!” Yuigahama insisted with a red face. The next instant, she clenched her fists. “And plus! There’s no way I can turn down one of Yukinon’s requests!”

“...I see,” Yukinoshita answered shortly, looking away sharply. Whether because of the sunset glow or her embarrassment, the colour rose on Yukinoshita’s cheeks.

But geez, I said I’d do it. Why did this chick treat Yuigahama so differently from me when we both said the exact same thing?

Hayama was watching the two girls with a bright, invigorating smile on his face. “What a nice friendship,” he remarked.

“Huh? Yeah. Those two get along.”

“So do you, Hikitani.”

What the hell was he talking about...? There was no guy named Hikitani in this club.

¹ A reference to Nobita, the main character from *Doraemon*. One of the running gags is that he’s good at cat’s cradle, but not much else.

3-6

The next day in class, Yuigahama was all fired up.

Instead of going to her usual place at recess, Yuigahama held out some bread and a canned drink for me. Together, we started our elaborate strategy meeting.

“I’ll ask around for now... s-so you don’t have to push yourself, Hikki. In fact, you don’t have to do anything at all.”

“Oh, cool. Much appreciated. What’s got you so motivated...?” I asked. She wasn’t taking any half-measures.

“Th-this and that, you know? ‘C-cos Yukinon asked me, yeah!”

Her devotion to Yukinoshita was rather touching. Still, I got tired just from watching her. An indescribable sense of unease came over me. “It’s good to be motivated, but what are you actually going to do?”

“Hmm, I’m gonna try listening in on the girls talk. When it comes to stuff like the relationships in class, the girls go way more in-depth. And they get really into it when you bring up someone you both dislike.”

“Whoa, girls talk is scary. Damn.” The enemy of my enemy is my friend, basically. Who knew they were employing such high-level tactics...?

“It’s nothing evil like that! It’s just complaining - or more like exchanging information?”

“It’s not what you say but how you say it, indeed.”

“*Anyway!* You suck at that stuff, Hikki. Just let me do it.”

But there was some truth to what Yuigahama said. Honestly, it wasn’t in my nature to squeeze information from people by talking to them. More like the moment I talked to them, they’d get suspicious of *me*. As soon as I asked them a question, they’d ask, “Who are you?” right back at me.

Unlike me, Yuigahama had status in the class and she was well-liked. Plus, she was sociable. This success of hers was due to having honed her skills since she was small. The skill of looking around restlessly for a place to fit in was a useful one indeed.

“Yeah, you’re right... sorry. I’ll leave it to you. Good luck!”

“Mmm! Yep!” Yuigahama declared with fighting spirit, before approaching the girls that were friendly with Hayama’s group. She walked up to Miura’s group.
“Sorry I took so long!”

“Oh, Yui. What kept you so long?” Miura, the leader of the group, answered lazily.

“Hey, ya know, Tobecchi, Ooka-kun and Yamato-kun have been so weird lately. They’ve been kinda all like, you know. I mean-”

Christ! I snorted as I overheard Yuigahama’s words.

A straight pitch! And a curve pitch at the same time! If it was a matter of strength, she’d be an easy S rank. But her control was abysmal - F rank for sure.

“Huh... so you’re the gossiping type, Yui...” said a girl, withdrawing slightly. I think her name was Ebina-san, maybe.

With a sideway glance, Miura turned on Yui, her eyes sparkling. “Now listen here, Yui. It’s not good to be saying that stuff, y’know? It’s not good to rat out your friends!” According to those wonderful words, Miura was a shining beacon of goodness.

Or, more accurately, Yuigahama had landed in a situation where she was the bad guy. What was she doing?

Still, Yuigahama did her very best to convince them she was not wrong. “No! You don’t get it! I was just, like, interested in them.”

“What, you have a crush on one of them?”

“No way! There’s someone I’m interested in but... well... huh?!”

At approximately the same time Yuigahama had “*oh crap!*” written all over her face, Miura broke out into a knowing smile. “Oho... so there *is* someone you like, Yui? Spill the beans, sister. Fess up. We can help you out!”

“Like I said! That’s not the point! I’m interested in those three, see? Like, I thought they were acting all weird to each other!”

“Oh, that’s it? How boring.” Miura promptly lost all interest. She opened up her cell phone and started playing with it.

But Ebina-san was still engaged. “I get it... you’re interested as well, Yui... actually, so am I!”

“Yeah, yeah! They’re, like, awkward and stuff!”

“I think so too,” Ebina-san declared with a solemn sigh. “The way I see it, Tobecchi is an uke for sure! And Yamato-kun’s the self-assured seme.

Oh, and Ooka-kun's the seductive uke. There's definitely something going on between those three! ¹"

"Oh, you get it," Yuigahama said at first. And then, "...huh?"

"But you know! All three of them are aiming for Hayato-kun for sure! Eeeeeek, I get the sense they're all holding back for their friends. I'm drowning in feels!"

Wow, seriously? Who knew Ebina-san had such an exaggerated persona? Her nose was bleeding.

Yuigahama was left stuttering in utter confusion, while Miura let out a long-suffering sigh. "Here we go again. It's Ebina's sickness. Geez, you'd be cute if you kept your mouth shut, so zip it and wipe your nose already."

"Ahahaha..." Yuigahama laughed incredibly awkwardly. When she realised I was watching, she clapped her hands together, signalling her failure. *Sorry!*

...yeah, not a surprise since her entire approach was off-track. Even if Ebina-san wasn't there, it wouldn't have ended well.

So in the end, it was up to me to do it.

¹ Now listen, boys and girls, when two homosexual men love each other very much in Japanese fiction, the one on the bottom is the uke (lit. the "receiver") and the one on top is the seme (lit. the "attacker").

But that said, mingling with my classmates and asking around was out of the question for me. So what should I do to get information from people?

The answer was obvious. I'd just do nothing but watch them. If I couldn't engage in conversation - no, *because* I couldn't engage in conversation, I'd have to use some other means to gather information.

It is said that essentially thirty per cent of all human communication is carried out with language. The other seventy per cent of information we obtain is through eye movements and subtle gestures. The phrase "a picture speaks a thousand words" comes from the importance of this kind of non-verbal communication. In other words, even a loner who is incapable of conversing can, through some paradox, pull off seventy per cent of what we consider communication. Right? *Right?*

Now then, behold one of my 108 special skills: "Human Observation". My other skill is shooting with a gun. That's why I'm pretty much Nobit@-kun.

Carrying out human observation is ridiculously simple:

1) Put on your earphones but turn off the music so that you can focus on your surroundings.

2) Pretend as if you're spacing out, but in reality, pay strict attention to the facial expressions of each member of Hayama's group.

That's all.

Hayama and the others were hanging around the window seat. Hayama was leaning against the wall, surrounded by Tobe, Yamato and Ooka.

That actually said quite a lot in itself. It was easy to see that Hayama had the most influence within that group. It was because he had his back against the wall, which covered the most defences, that he was an appropriate king. By all likelihood, they had no idea themselves what they were doing. But it was *because* they had no self-awareness and it was therefore all instinct to them that it was a very revealing action.

I could see that all three of them had their pre-established roles to play.

“Yo, man. Our coach started hitting stray balls to the rugby club! Not good! And they were hard balls too!”

“...yeah, our club advisor flipped his shit.”

“What a pain in the ass! Y’know, the rugby team is still good. Our soccer team sucks. Maaan, it’s bad. It’s really bad when the ball flies out in the outfield. It’s fast and furious!”

Ooka set up the joke and Yamato carried it. Then Tobe shouted the punchline. It was like watching a well-rehearsed play. Shakespeare said, “All the world’s a

stage,” but surely you could also say that people only perform the roles that are given to them.

Also, the director and audience of that play was Hayama. Hayama laughed at their stories from time to time, suggested the topic from time to time and got into high spirits along with them from time to time. I realised many things from watching them all:

Oh, that guy tutted quietly just now so you wouldn't see it.

That guy would shut up whenever the guy next to them started recounting his story.

That guy would play with his phone with a bored look on his face and not really get into the topic.

Whenever a somewhat dirty joke came up, that guy would smile vaguely - what a pathetic virgin. No doubt about it. Source: me. (I wonder why whenever a dirty joke suddenly comes up, people pretend they're above it all in spite of whatever they're really feeling...?)

...I got the feeling that last bit of information was completely irrelevant.

It didn't seem like there was much to go on. As that thought went through my mind, I sighed.

“’ scuse me, sorry,” Hayama said as he left his seat and looked in my direction. It seemed I’d been staring so hard at Hayama that he’d noticed. My heart started thumping at the thought one of them would ask “whatchu lookin’ at? You pickin’ a fight?” or something like that.

Hayama came up next to me. “What?” I asked gruffly, afraid of my innermost thoughts.

In response, Hayama didn’t get particularly pissed off, nor did he grab me by the shirt or demand my loose change. He just smiled brightly. “Oh, I was just wondering if you figured something out.”

“Nah...”

The most I’d figured out was that Ebina-san was a fujoshi and Ooka was a virgin². As I thought that, I glanced over at Ooka and the others, only to find a surprising scene unfold.

The three of them were playing with their phones listlessly. And occasionally, they would all glance in Hayama’s direction.

² Literally meaning “rotten girl”, a fujoshi refers to someone who likes gay men.

The answer hit me at that moment. It was a flash of insight like getting shot in the back of the neck by a tranquiliser gun³.

“Did something happen?” Hayama asked, puzzled.

I smirked back at him. “I’ve solved the entire mystery!”

The reasoning behind the reveal comes after the ad break, of course.

³ In the anime/manga series *Detective Conan*, Conan knocks out the detective with a tranquiliser gun and impersonates him so that his deductions are taken seriously by adults.

3-7

The people who gathered in the clubroom after school were Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and me. Oh, and Hayama too.

“What did you find?” Yukinoshita pressed Yuigahama and me for our information report.

Yuigahama laughed sheepishly. “Sorry! I asked the girls if they knew anything, but I got zilch!” she apologised meekly.

Yeah, but that couldn’t be helped. That was also because of how Ebina-san went on and on about things Yuigahama really didn’t need to know like shipping the uke and seme and whatnot. Yuigahama’s attempt at listening for information went nowhere.

Yukinoshita lowered her head and peered down directly at Yuigahama. But she did not seem particularly mad. “Is that so? In that case, I don’t mind.”

“Huh? Are you okay with that?”

“On the contrary, today you found out that the girls had no interest and were not related. That makes it purely a problem concerning Hayama-kun’s group. Yuigahama-san, you did well.”

“Y-Yukinon...” Yuigahama’s eyes clouded over with emotion.

Yukinoshita neatly dodged Yuigahama’s hug. Yuigahama’s forehead hit the wall with a thump and her eyes welled up with tears.

Astonished, Yukinoshita nursed Yuigahama’s forehead. At the same time, she looked at me. “So, what about you?”

“Sorry, I didn’t find a clue to the culprit’s identity.”

“...I see.” I thought she’d rip my head off, but Yukinoshita only let out a resigned sigh. Then she looked at me with very pitying eyes. “Nobody would talk to you.”

“No, that’s not it...”

It’s true I had no confidence anyone would answer me if I talked to them. The act of talking to people and broaching a subject uses up a high amount of spiritual calories. It’d waste as much MP as Magic Burst¹.

“I didn’t find out who the culprit was, but I did learn one thing,” I said.

¹ A spell in the *Dragon Quest* series that uses all the user’s remaining MP to launch an attack on all opponents.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and Hayama all leaned forward. Doubtful eyes, expectant eyes, interested eyes - as I received their gazes in turn, I let out a single cough. As if on cue, Yukinoshita asked, "What did you learn, I wonder?"

"That group is Hayama's."

"Huh? Aren't you stating the obvious?" Yuigahama said vehemently as if I was an idiot. All I could see in her eyes was, "*Who's this virgin? Ooka?*" Hey, leave Ooka out of it.

"Uhh... Hikitani-kun, what do you mean?"

"Oh, I phrased it badly. I meant 'Hayama's' in the possessive sense. In other words, the group belongs to Hayama and exists for his sake."

"Nah, I don't really think it's like that..." Hayama said, but that was only because of his lack of self-awareness. In that case, maybe the three in that group were just as unaware as he was.

But since I was an outsider, the differences to me were as plain as day. "Hayama, have you ever seen those three when you're not around?"

"No, never..."

“That goes without saying,” Yukinoshita said as if I was an idiot. “It’s not like you can see anything when you’re not there.”

I nodded. “That’s the only reason why Hayama never noticed. Those three stop getting along at all as soon as it’s just the three of them. To put it simply, they all like Hayama as their ‘friend’, but the others are ‘friends of their friend’.”

Yuigahama was the only one who reacted to what I said. “Oh. *Oooohhh*. I totally get it. It’s awkward when the person who keeps the conversation going isn’t there. I never know what to say so I end up playing with my phone...” She hung her head, as if remembering something unpleasant.

Yukinoshita leaned in towards the down-faced Yuigahama. “Is... that what it’s like?” she whispered quietly into Yuigahama’s ear, tugging on her sleeve hesitantly. Yuigahama folded her arms and nodded in confirmation.

That was Yukinoshita for you. She had no experience with friends, and so she had no experience with friends of friends either.

Hayama merely went quiet, as if reflecting on my words. But this was one thing Hayama couldn’t fix. To him, they really were his friends. But that relationship didn’t extend between all three of them - they just had to make do with each other.

Being someone’s friend meant bending over backwards for them. So on no condition did I think that having a lot of friends is a wonderful thing.

Hayama was currently stuck in that quagmire. He was surrounded by friends, but on the other hand, you could say he was trapped by them. Running away wasn't an option either. In *Dragon Quest* terms it was "But Thou Must".

Still, I knew a way to get out of that situation.

"Assuming you're correct, Hikigaya-kun, their motives only become stronger." Yukinoshita put a hand on her chin in contemplation. "Perhaps there's no way to determine who did it out of those three. The situation can't be controlled unless the culprit is removed. All the more reason to suspect those three..."

Removing people, making things normal - Yukinoshita was a scary one. Had she *removed* the Sagawa-san and Shimoda-san of her past?

On that note, kicking people out of school was a terrible thing to do, so I suggested another approach. "Nah, there's no need to remove the culprit. There's a better way," I said.

Yukinoshita tilted her head and peered at me quizzically.

There was no mistaking the wisdom behind removing the culprit when a crime had been committed. But another option remained. In the case of a jewel theft, the crime would never have happened if the jewel did not exist. Remove the jewel that would be stolen ahead of time. I, with my ninja skills, chose the way of the phantom thief over the detective.

“Hayama, you can solve this if you want to. You don’t have to search for the culprit and the situation won’t escalate any further - and this way, they might become better friends.”

I wonder what sort of look I had on my face as I said that. I was smiling, at least. And it was such a splendid smile that it made Yuigahama pull back in horror.

Inadvertently, I started cackling the way Zaimokuza did. If there existed a devil that chased humans to make wicked deals with them, it might have looked like me at that moment.

“You wanna know?” I asked.

Hayama, the poor, lost lamb, listened to the devil’s offer and nodded fervently in response.

3-8

It was the next day when Hayama made the decision regarding his own fate.

In the classroom, the names of all the classmates were listed on the blackboard. Each grouping consisted of three names, and they were written down to indicate the groups for the workplace tour. The three girls sitting next to me giggled and smiled at each other as they went up to the blackboard and began writing down their own names, having promised each other beforehand.

As for me, I didn't call out to anyone and just sat there watching as if I were spaced out. This was how I dealt with those occasions when we had to split into groups. At these times it was vital not to make a single move. The late Takeda Shingen also said the same thing: "Immobile like a mountain." He was completely right. *"Fast like the wind, silent like a forest, intrusive like the fire, immobile like a mountain."*¹ That was me right there. I was waiting for the winds of fortune to shift and for the homeroom teacher to say, "Yes, yes, I know you all hate Hikigaya-kun, but it's not good to leave him out! Not good!"

(...that's what my fourth grade homeroom teacher said. I'll never forgive that old hag Isehara.)

¹ A daimyo (feudal lord) from the warring states era famous for his military expertise. The words are from his slogan and were used to personify both Takeda's military power and the man himself.

Anyway, as the saying “Good things come to those who wait” goes, all a loner has to do is wait around half-asleep the whole time until two classmates who can’t find a third person resorts to calling out your name. And that’s how our happy little group gets formed!

...meh, I’m going to sleep.

I used one of my 108 special skills - feigning sleep. Incidentally, one of my other abilities is “become one of the good guys during the longer arcs”. I’m pretty much Gi@n².

As I started nodding off, someone gently shook me by the shoulders. I could feel the softness of those delicate hands even through my clothes. When a voice called out “Hachiman”, it was heavenly music to my ears. As if I were gently shaken awake by heaven, I opened my eyes from my slumber.

“Morning, Hachiman.”

“...an angel? Oh, it’s Totsuka.”

Whoa, did that take me off guard. He was so cute I thought for sure he was an angel. Giggling, Totsuka sat down at the seat next to me where the girls had been just before.

² A reference to Gian from *Doraemon*. In the regular episodes he’s a bully to Nobita, but in the feature films, he helps him out when he’s genuinely in trouble.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Totsuka held onto the sleeves of his gym clothes tightly and gazed at me with upturned eyes. “A-about the group formations...” he began hesitantly.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. You’ve done well for yourself.”

So Totsuka had already decided after all. What a pity.

As I stretched, I looked around the classroom. The majority of groups had been picked, so it was about time for us loners to make an appearance. I had to join a makeshift group with the other loners. There were difficulties even in groupings among loners, and if I made a late start, I’d end up being forced to group with two people who got along well. It was time to look for the losers by checking the names on the blackboard.

At that exact same moment, a group was getting written down. It was a certain threesome I remembered on sight.

“Tobe, the ditzy blonde.”

“Yamato, the indecisive dimwit.”

“Ooka, the virgin fence-sitter.”

The new Three Musketeers! I had unwittingly witnessed the birth of a new legacy. By the way, my favourite character is “Ooka, the virgin fence-sitter”. After he wrote down his name and looked at the others’ faces, he laughed awkwardly. I couldn’t see Hayama’s name anywhere.

As I watched the three of them, I heard a sudden voice. “Can I sit here?”

Without waiting for my reply, he sat down next to Totsuka. At the sudden appearance of an unexpected newcomer, Totsuka threw an anxious look in my direction and muttered, “Er, uhhh...” It was super cute.

“Thanks to you, we settled things peacefully. Thanks, man.” The newcomer smiled cheerfully. It was Hayama Hayato.

“I did nothing,” I insisted. So why the hell was this guy talking to me like he knew me? Was he a nice guy? A really nice guy?

“Give yourself some credit. If you hadn’t said what you did, they might still be fighting.”

Or so Hayama claimed, since I didn’t do a single nice thing. In fact, all I’d been thinking of was dragging Hayama onto the path of the loner.

The reason why those three were fighting was because they wanted to be with Hayama. So take out the root cause and voila.

Basically, the answer was to separate Hayama Hayato from his friends. The existence of a loner was like a permanently neutral country. If you weren't one, trouble would come your way even when it wasn't your own doing. If the world was populated entirely by loners, there would undoubtedly be no such thing as war or discrimination. Hey, I deserved the Nobel Peace Prize for that.

"I've always wanted everyone to get along, but I see now that I cause conflict too..." Hayama muttered, and for the first time, he seemed lonely.

Unable to find any words to respond to Hayama, I let out a non-committal grunt. Hayama had gone to the Service Club out of his sheer desire to find a solution to help his friends and his group, and all I had given him was a harsh, bitter choice.

Even though he had gone out of his way to talk to me and had remembered Zaimokuza's name. Even though he was a nice guy. Even though he lived a high school life more blissful than anyone else's.

And yet it was because Hayama Hayato didn't like that about himself that he said all that.

"Those three were surprised when I said I wouldn't get in a group with them. I think it'd be nice if this could motivate them into becoming real friends."

"...yeah, I guess." Honestly, I thought anyone this nice had to have some kind of illness. I made the appropriate generic response as I drew back slightly.

“Thanks. Oh, and you know, I haven’t decided on a group yet, so how about we go together?” Smiling, Hayama held out his right hand in front of me.

…huh? A handshake? What was up with this riajuu, acting all chummy with me? Geez, don’t screw with me. What, was he an American or something?

“O-okay, buddy.” And because of that, I unintentionally answered like a Yankee American.

I slapped his hand (“Ouch”) and Hayama smiled once again. Now that he had become a loner like me, we might come to understand each other better now.

Now then, all we needed was to secure one more person and our work was done.

Suddenly, an adorable organism was groaning next to me.

“…Totsuka, what’s up?” I looked at him. Totsuka’s teary eyes and his sulky face were super cute.

“Hachiman… what about me?”

“Er, uh, huh?” I blinked. “I, uh, thought you’d already decided.”

“I have!” Totsuka braced himself and clung to my cuff of my blazer tightly. “I decided to go with you from the beginning, Hachiman.”

“So *that’s* what you meant by decided...”

What was this literary trick? But you know, since a loner’s ability to read subtext was unnecessarily high, I’d never even realised he had never specified who he was going with. When I looked at the blushing, sulking Totsuka, my face softened without me knowing. When I laughed, Totsuka looked up at me and giggled.

Hayama, who was watching the two of us smiling, stood up straight and looked back at us over his shoulder. “Right, I’ll go write our names. Where do you want to go?”

“It’s up to you,” I said, and Totsuka nodded in agreement.

So Hayama began writing our names on the blackboard:

“Hayama”, “Totsuka”, “Hikigaya”. Oh, so he didn’t spell my name wrong. That made me kind of happy, I guess. Could it be that these people were my friends?

Hayama went on and began to write “workplace we want to visit”. And then-

“Oh, ooooh,” a girl remarked. “I’ll do the same thing Hayato’s doing.”

“No way, Hayama-kun’s going there?” another girl said. “Oh, I’ll change mine too, I’ll change mine too!”

“I’ll go there too!” And another.

“Hayato’s the real deal! He’s super Hayato!”

Our classmates bombarded Hayama all at once. And then, as they eagerly yabbered among themselves, they chose the same place as Hayama did and replaced their names on the blackboard. Soon enough, my name was lost underneath the mountain of names written over the top. And once again, my existence was ignored accordingly.

See, this is why I’m a ninja. I should go to Iga or Kouga for my workplace tour³. And with that, I slip away unnoticed, sirs and ladies.

Needless to say, friendship is also something that can slip away unnoticed at any moment.

³ These two provinces in Japan are associated with ninja.

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.



hachiman's mobile

FROM Hachiman
TITLE Re 19:50

I was asleep. My bad.
For math, it'll be pages
4-51, plus chapter three
from the workbook. Also,
how come you know my
address?

FROM Hachiman
TITLE Re3 19:51

Oi.

zaimokuza's mobile

FROM Zaimokuza 16:40
TITLE nontitle

Hachiman, it is I, Zaimokuza. Art thou
studying hard? This has naught to
do with anything, but wilt thou
not inscribe the revelation of the
math exam contents here?

FROM Zaimokuza 16:40
TITLE nontitle

Hachiman, pew... Pew pew pew!
Whew, thou art as dense as a
Minovsky particle. Hachiman, answer
me, pew pew... answer me, pew pew...

FROM Zaimokuza
TITLE nontitle 17:36

I command thee to respond, Hachiman!! Urgh, so even that had no
effect... In that case, I have no choice but to cast that spell. Darkness
beyond the dusk, redder even than a stream of blood KRY

FROM Zaimokuza 18:24
TITLE nontitle

Sorry, I got a little carried away. Please tell me what will be on the math exam.

FROM Zaimokuza 19:51
TITLE Re2

Oho. I will be eternally grateful for this favor. Verily, I pray for thy
continued good fortune in this war. When next we meet, it shall be
on the battlefield, will it not? ~< `・ω・` > Fare thee well!



Chapter 4: For Various Reasons, Kawasaki Saki Is Crooked

The midterms were converging on us right before our eyes.

There are many cases where study time roughly meant family restaurant time or library time, but there's no way to supervise a high school student who takes a stroll at eleven at night. I'm told that you get kicked out from a family restaurant past ten o'clock. For that reason, night-time studying is something done entirely at home. By the way, night-time studying is not the same thing as night-time pro wrestling.

The hands of the clock were pointing close to twelve. I groaned and stretched. I figured I'd still be studying for one or two more hours. Should I drink some coffee? I wondered to myself. With heavy feet, I dragged myself down the stairs and into the living room. The coffee was right where I remembered it.

Replenishing one's sugar content is absolutely indispensable when you overuse your brain. By that I mean it was time for the sickly sweet MAX Coffee to make its appearance.

(Sudden thought: MAX Coffee is erotic when you put the caffeine and just the right amount of milk in it. First of all, it looks uncannily like a giant pair of breasts. The coffee winks at you and suggests, "I won't let you sleep tonight ☆" - or something like that. Someone should draw MAX Coffee-tan on Pixiv for me¹...)

¹ Pixiv is a site many Japanese artists use to upload anime-esque drawings. The '-tan' refers to the Kansai equivalent of the honorific '-chan' and is used as a term of endearment for cute things.

As I was walking into the living room, thinking various useless paraphernalia about MAX Coffee, I noticed my little sister Komachi napping on the sofa. This chick's midterms were coming up soon just like mine, but as usual she didn't have a care in the world.

As I rummaged around for the MAX Coffee I bought, I remembered that the container had already been opened and so I started boiling the water instead. I poured water into the Tefal kettle, flipping the power switch on with a click as I did so. Bored and waiting for the water to boil, I sat at the edge of the sofa where my little sister was sleeping.

Komachi was sleeping with her stomach exposed provocatively.

Her bare, white skin rose and fell in time with her snores. At the same time, her cute belly button twitched. As she stirred with a soft groan, I could see she was stretched out under my T-shirt and blazer, both of which she had taken without asking. I hadn't noticed this earlier because she had been curled up in a ball, but why was this chick in her underwear? She was going to catch a cold at this rate.

I covered her with a nearby bath towel for now. In reaction, Komachi mumbled something in her sleep. As this was going on, the boiling water had started hissing and a click announced that it was done. I tipped the instant coffee into a mug and poured the hot water on top of it.

A pleasant smell wafted from the coffee. I added an ample amount of milk and sugar to the dark coffee and stirred it four whole times with a teaspoon. When I did that, my lovely sweet coffee was ready to be served.

The milk's luxurious aroma and the coffee's sweet-smelling fragrance mixed with each other. I just knew it was going to be great.

As if she had caught a wind of that scent, Komachi sprang up with a start.

The first thing she did was stand stock still, staring at me in silence for two whole seconds. Then, without saying a single word, she took three whole seconds to open the shirt and curtain in silence. Then she opened her eyes wide and stared at the clock for five whole seconds in silence. It took her ten seconds in total to grasp her current situation.

Then she inhaled deeply. "Crap! I overslept!" she started shouting in an obnoxiously loud voice. "I only planned to sleep for an hour, but then I slept for five!"

"Oh, I see how it is. You overslept, you say? You went straight to sleep as soon as you got home."

"You suck! I had a shower before I slept!"

"Geez, I have absolutely no idea why you're so offended."

"Anyway, why didn't you wake me up?!"



Komachi really got pissed at me for some reason. I thought that “I overslept” meant pretty much the same thing as “I’ m a pig ☆” .

“I don’t really care, but put on some pants for god’s sake. And who gave you permission to wear my clothes?”

“Hm? Oh, this. It’s the perfect nightie. Isn’t it like a one piece?” she said as she pulled on the front of the shirt.

Don’t stretch it, don’t stretch it. I can see your bra, you know. And don’t twirl around - I can see your panties.

“...okay, I’ll stop wearing them, you whiner,” she said.

“Oh, thanks. Then I’ll give you some underwear, Komachi.”

“Ohhh, much appreciated!”

I sipped my coffee, having sworn deep in my heart that I would actually give her a dust cloth instead. As Komachi rolled up the sleeves of my shirt like a one piece pyjama again, she went into the kitchen and started heating up milk in the microwave.

“By the way, what are you doing at this hour?”

“Studying for exams. I came down ‘cos I had a break just now,” I answered.

Komachi made a sound of surprise. “I still haven’t had a break now that you mention it.” Then she paused. “Onii-chan, I swear, you’ll be a businesslike man when you start working.”

“Hey, businesslike doesn’t mean I like working. Your English sucks.”

“No way, onii-chan. English is totally my forte. I’m a genius yo. I AM SMARTICLES,” she said with not very genius-like English ability. *Smarticles isn’t even a word, you dolt.*

The microwave let out a ring. Komachi held the mug in both hands, and as she blew on it to cool it down, she started walking towards me. “Guess I’ll study too.”

“Be my guest. I’ll get back to studying, then. You better stick to it, too.”

I downed my coffee with one gulp and stood up. But at that moment, Komachi pulled on the back of my T-shirt and let out a croak like a bullfrog. When I turned around, Komachi was smiling broadly.

“You said ‘you too,’ right? Doesn’t that normally mean ‘let’s do it together’? Onii-chan, is your Japanese impaired?”

“You’re the one whose Japanese is impaired...”

Well, it wouldn’t hurt to dumb myself down temporarily by looking at my idiotic little sister’s homework, I figured.

And with that, my night-time study session with my little sister began.

We brought all our study tools from our rooms and spread them out on the table in the living room. I decided to focus mainly on Japanese history today, so I went through Yamakawa’s group of questions as well as the manual, and then I got into the notes.

On Komachi’s end, there was “*Middle School English: Target 1800*”, as if that would help with her deplorable English.

Together, we studied silently and diligently. I answered the questions and included extensive explanations in the notes whenever there were mistakes. We repeated that process countless times. By the time I finished looking over the contents of the midterms, I realised that Komachi was staring at me with a faraway look in her eyes.

“...what?” I demanded.

“Hm? Oh, I was just thinking you’re so straight-laced, onii-chan.”

“You lookin’ down on me? You pickin’ a fight, you brat? I’ll pull your hair!”

But Komachi just laughed at my feeble threats. “So you say, onii-chan, but you definitely wouldn’t hit me.”

“Huh? That’s just what you think. The reason I don’t hit you is because our parents would punch me if I did. That’s all. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

“Teehee. You’re blushing, you’re blushing,” she sang as she did a peace sign.

“Sh... shuddup...”

For now, I contented myself with poking her on the forehead. Specifically, I flicked an eraser at her head, causing her to self-destruct. Basically, I unleashed all the reserves of my power in a complete, no-holds-barred attack.

“Oof!” Komachi moaned. The rubber hit her forehead, leaving a dint. As she nursed her forehead, Komachi glared at me with teary eyes. “Hmph... and here I was praising you for being such a good student...”

“That’s because you said a dumbass thing. Now just study already, geez.”

“Stuff like that is what makes you straight-laced. Man, there are so many different types of brothers and sisters out there.

I have a friend who goes to the same cram school as me whose older sister became a delinquent. She doesn't come home at all at night and stuff."

"Uh huh." It seemed Komachi had already lost all motivation to study. Somewhere along the lines, she'd closed the Target: 1800 book. By now, we were neck deep in pointless chatter time.

As I wisely ignored Komachi's chatter, I went on studying Japanese history. *645, the year of the Taika Reforms was 645.*

"But ya know, his sis was a super serious student until she got into Soubu High. I wonder if something happened to her."

"Oh, is that so."

Komachi's words went in one ear and out the other. *694, the year Fujiwara-kyo became the capital was 694. Oh wait, was that 794? No, that was the Heian-kyo².*

Still, it was enough to put me to sleep. People have a strong will not to lose to drugs. In other words, no matter how much caffeine I took, my desire to sleep might win over.

² A common strategy for memorising historical dates in Japanese is using mnemonics. In the Japanese, Hachiman was reciting mnemonics, but in English I just made him repeat the dates. Naturally, Japanese mnemonics are completely untranslatable, but you can read about how they work here: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2011/08/08/language/goro-awase-system-spins-off-numbers-you-wont-forget/>

“But well, it’s his family so I can’t really say anything. We’re getting closer lately, so he’s been confiding in me, but there’s not much I can do. Oh, his name’s Kawasaki Taishi-kun and he started attending my cram school this April.”

“Komachi.”

My mechanical pencil fell from my fingers with a clatter. My tiredness had vanished in an instant.

“What’s your relationship with this *Taishi-kun*? What do you mean by *getting closer*?”

“Whoa, you’ve got a scary look in your eyes, onii-chan...”

It seemed I had been looking at her kind of seriously. Komachi was slightly startled. But this was my idiot sister here. Something might happen to her if she didn’t watch out for herself. It was natural that I’d be worried for her as a family member. If she was entangled with some boy, it wouldn’t be good for her.

Onii-chan really doesn't tolerate that stuff.

“Meh. Tell me if there’s something bothering you. I told you this before, but the stuff I do with the Service Club - which I still don’t get, by the way - might be able to help you out. I guess.”

Komachi puffed out her cheeks and smiled when I said that.

“Onii-chan, you really *are* a straight-laced guy!”

4-2

It was morning. The sparrows were chirping. So this was the so-called “fast-forward to the next day” that happens in stories.

I opened my eyes, blinking in surprise. I was greeted, not by my usual scenery, but by an unfamiliar ceiling. By that, I mean I was in the living room. It seemed we had somehow fallen asleep while we were studying. The last thing I remembered was interrogating Komachi about her relationship status.

“Hey, Komachi. It’s morning,” I called out.

That was when I realised I couldn’t see my little sister anywhere. I looked around my surroundings for Komachi for about two seconds. Next, I peered out the window. The sun had risen quite high. It took about three seconds to confirm this. Then a sinking feeling came over me and I looked at the clock in a cold sweat. It was nine o’clock. I looked it up and I looked it down, but it was still nine o’clock. It took a full five seconds for this to process.

The impact of the situation hit me in the span of those ten seconds.

“I’m gonna be super late...” I hung my head, depressed.

A breakfast of toast, ham and eggs lay on the table, along with a letter Komachi left behind before she had departed.

Dear onii-chan, I'm going ahead since I don't want to be late. Take it easy!

S.P. Make sure you eat your breakfast!!

“Dumbass... you think you're the Security Police?”

The right way of writing it was P.S., as in Playstation.

Anyway, since there was no use getting worked up over something I had no control over, I chewed down the breakfast she'd prepared for me and prepared to go to school, muttering under my breath as I did so. It seemed my parents had already gone to work. Since both my parents worked, mornings in the Hikigaya household started early. My mother made breakfast but Komachi was usually in charge of dinner.

And yet not a single person had woken me up despite all of that. While I did worry about whether I was loved and all that, I like to believe in the kindness of letting someone sleep in.

My blood was pumping as I changed my clothes. After making sure the door was locked behind me, I left the house.

As I cycled leisurely down the riverside, I looked up and saw gigantic columns of clouds stretching across the sky rapidly.

Today, the path to school was beautifully quiet. It put me at ease. Usually, the route to Soubu High was a cycling racecourse where students from other schools pitted themselves against each other. Overtaking the others and shouting “Go! Magnum!” was the best feeling ever. When you’re against guys, you get fired up and say stuff like, “I won’t lose! Sonic!”¹

Today, the back-and-forth action was between older ladies trying their very best to lose weight and older men walking their dogs, and it was about as intense as watching someone go fishing. Going to school this way wasn’t bad once in a while. Actually, now that I think about it, cycling underneath a blue sky felt quite good. It was just the sort of thing you’d tell someone to get them to skip school with you, and it works around fifty per cent of the time.

And yet, why was it that as I got close to school, a sudden melancholy came over me...?

Despite that, I didn’t move stealthily. In fact, I entered school the normal way. At this time the teachers were in class, you see, so there was no way they’d spot me for being late. Just being scared was pointless. I learned that from the seventy-two times I was late last year. This was already my eighth time being late this year, which would probably affect my school record at this rate. I wanted two hundred victories by my third year of high school.

Getting into the school gates was easy. The problem was the classroom. I stopped my bicycle at the parking area and turned briskly towards the entrance. As soon as I entered the schoolyard, I felt like the power of gravity increased in one hit.

¹ A reference to *Bakusō Kyōdai Let’s & Go!!*, an old racing manga.

I was on Planet Vegeta, you know?² I dragged myself up the stairs and down the hallway where there were no people, until finally I arrived at my classroom on the second floor.

I took a deep breath in front of the door. Then I put my hand on the handle. In that moment, I had butterflies in my stomach.

The door flung open.

And then all eyes were upon me at once, no one saying anything. Silence had come over the entire classroom. The whispering and the voice of my teacher's lecturing died down into nothingness.

I didn't hate being late. What I *did* hate was this atmosphere.

For example, if it was Hayama doing this, I'm pretty sure they'd be all like, "Hey, Hayama! Come a little later next time!" "Hayama, you're so slow, man!" "Hahaha, Hayama you dork!"

But in my case, nobody said anything, and for a moment I got stares from all directions asking, "Who is this guy?" I answered with silence as I entered the classroom with heavy footsteps. The moment I sat down at my seat, a sudden fatigue came over me.

² A reference to *Dragon Ball Z*.

I sighed inadvertently. For my teacher, that was the final straw.

“Hikigaya. Come see me when the class ends,” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she slammed her teacher’s desk with her fists.

“Okay...”

...I was screwed. I hung my head in response, prompting Hiratsuka-sensei to nod in satisfaction as she turned around and resumed writing on the blackboard, her white coat fluttering behind her.

Wait up, it’s only fifteen minutes until the end of class!

And the cruel thing was that those fifteen minutes went by so quickly. While I was ignoring class and thinking of a hundred different excuses for being late, the bell chimed.

“That’s all for this lesson. Hikigaya, come up here,” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she beckoned to me impatiently.

I looked at her face with an overwhelming desire to flee.

Hiratsuka-sensei scowled openly at me. “Now then, before I punch you, I’ll ask you why you were late, just to be nice.”

She'd already decided to punch me!

"No, you're mistaken. Please wait a moment. Don't you know the phrase 'fashionably late'? Basically, this is a rehearsal for when I become a powerful, elite executive."

"I thought you wanted to be a stay-at-home husband."

"Urk!" I winced, but soon regained my footing. "W-well! It's a mistake to think that being late is inherently a bad thing. You get it? The police start moving after the incident happens. It's well established that the hero arrives at the last minute. In other words, they're always late. But who blames them for it?! No one! The irony here is that tardiness is justice!" I shouted from deep within my soul.

When I finished, Hiratsuka-sensei had a distant look in her eyes for some reason.

"...Hikigaya. Let me tell you one thing. Feeble justice is no different from evil."

"...f-feeble justice is even *better* than evi- wait! Don't hit me! No!"

Aku Soku Zan³. Hiratsuka-sensei's fist sunk into my liver with precise accuracy. My body groaned from the damage. As I keeled over and fell to the ground, I let out a cough.

Hiratsuka-sensei sighed with astonishment while I writhed in agony. "Geez... there's no end to the problem children in this class." But she didn't say that with disgust - in fact, she looked happy more than anything. "I'm talking about one other person when I say that."

Completely ignoring that I had fallen to the ground, Hiratsuka-sensei clacked her heels against the floor and faced the backdoor of the classroom. I looked in the same direction from my position on the ground and noticed the appearance of a lone female student holding her schoolbag.

"Kawasaki Saki. Are you fashionably late too?" Hiratsuka-sensei called out to her with a wry smile on her face.

But the girl named Kawasaki Saki only answered with a silent bob of her head. Then she walked right past my sprawled-out body on the floor and made for her seat.

Her long, black hair fell all the way down her back; the unnecessary parts of her shirt cuffs were loosened up; her long, sharp legs looked made for kicking.

³ Literally, "Slay Evil Immediately." A reference to the motto of the Shinsengumi, a group of revolutionary soldiers. Also widely associated with Saitou Hajime's sword ability in *Rurouni Kenshin*, a classic shonen manga.

But what made an impression on me were her ambitionless eyes, which gazed vacantly into the distance. Not to mention the black lace that seemed as if it had been embroidered by an artisan.

I swore I'd seen that girl somewhere before... wait a minute, if she was in my class, then no shit I'd seen her before.

Since I could see up her skirt from my curled-up position on the floor, I sprang to my feet with a start. I didn't want anyone to get suspicious of me.

And at that moment, something clicked in my head.

“...you're the black lace girl, aren't you?”

With that, all my doubts cleared away at once.

Inadvertently, I flashbacked to a scene that had burnt itself into my eyes. I recalled the girl who had suddenly made fun of me when she saw me on the roof.

Oh, so she was in my class, huh? It was time to confirm once more that this was the girl I understood now to be Kawasaki Saki. Instead of going to her seat, Kawasaki stood where she was and looked back casually over her shoulder at me.



“...are you a moron?” Kawasaki Saki asked. She didn’t kick or punch me. She wasn’t blushing with embarrassment and her face wasn’t red with anger - it was as if she had no interest at all. She was just mildly annoyed.

If Yukinoshita Yukino was frigid, Kawasaki Saki was just cold. It was like the difference between dry ice and normal ice. Yukinoshita scalded anyone who touched her.

With a disgusted look on her face, Kawasaki brushed up a loose strand of hair before facing her seat this time. After she pulled out her chair and sat on it, she looked at the window blankly as if she was bored. It was as if she was looking outside so she wouldn’t have to look inside.

There was no one in the world who wouldn’t notice her “don’t talk to me” aura. But her “don’t talk to me” aura was still weak. No one would talk to me in class even if I had my “please talk to me” aura on.

“Kawasaki Saki, huh...?”

“Hikigaya, quit muttering the name of a girl whose skirt you looked up with deep emotion.” Hiratsuka-sensei placed a hand on my shoulder. Her hand was awfully cold. “We’ll have a nice talk about this later. Come see me in the staffroom after school.”

4-3

After a short hour of being lectured to by Hiratsuka-sensei, I stopped by the bookstore in the Marinepia shopping centre instead of going straight home.

I eyed the shelves and purchased a single book. There went my thousand-yen note, along with the small change jiggling around in my wallet.

After that, I went to the café, thinking I may as well study. But it seemed everyone else was thinking the same thing, because the place was crowded with students of all sorts. Just when I was figuring I should have gone home after all, I spotted some familiar faces.

A jersey-clad Totsuka Saika was staring down the showcase cake. (At our school, you could wear the uniform or a jersey - it didn't matter which.) The vibe from that scene was even sweeter than fresh cream, and I was drawn to it like ants are drawn to sugar. I'm one of those "it has to be *just* right☆" kind of people. Hey, I'm pretty much Goldilocks.

"Okay, it's your turn to ask a question next, Yukinon," said familiar face number two.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita weren't wasting their time as they waited to get served and were absorbed in their studying.

“Right, a Japanese question then,” Yukinoshita stated. “Complete the following expression: ‘When the going gets tough-’”

“...the Tokyo-Chiba line shuts down?”

Correction: it was just a Trans Chiba Ultra Quiz¹. And Yuigahama got the answer wrong too. The correct answer was “These days, there are more trains that slow down without stopping.”

At this mistake, Yukinoshita’s face clouded over too, just as you’d expect of her. “Incorrect... next question, then. This one is more about geography. Name two of Chiba’s local specialties.”

Tick tock, tick tock. The hands of the clock ticked away. Yuigahama gulped. “Miso peas... and boiled peas?” She had a deadly serious look on her face.

“Hey. You think all we do is grow peas in Chiba?” I asked.

“Whoa!” Yuigahama jumped. Then she said, “Oh, it’s just Hikki. For a moment there, I thought you were some weird guy chatting me up...”

¹ A reference to the old Japanese game show *Trans America Ultra Quiz*, which quizzed contestants on their geography knowledge.

Crap. I'd been meaning to come back later, but now I was standing in this stupidly long queue all because I corrected Yuigahama's mistake. Damn it! How I suffer through my love of Chiba!

At Yuigahama's exaggerated reaction, Totsuka turned around and faced me. Then a bright smile lit up his face. "Hachiman! So you were invited to this study group too!"

Totsuka sidled up to me, grinning. But naturally there was no way I had been invited, and Yuigahama had a sour, "What a pain. This guy's not one of us," look on her face. *Oi, quit it, you're bringing up memories of my classmate's birthday party in elementary school.* Even though I'd brought a present and everything, they all gave me the cold shoulder and I was on the verge of tears.

"Hikigaya-kun was never invited," Yukinoshita said. "Is there something you want?"

"Yukinoshita, stop confirming the facts for the sole purpose of making someone feel bad."

Geez, if I didn't have such a strong sense of will, you would've gotten your just desserts, bitch.

In actuality, I would probably have yelled something incomprehensible and hit her with a chair. I wanted her to apologise to my exceptionally strong ego.

“Aah, I was meaning to call out to you, Hikki, but I had food in my mouth...” said Yuigahama.

“Nah, I’m really not bothered.” I was used to this kind of thing.

“Did you come here to study for your exam as well, Hikigaya-kun?” asked Yukinoshita.

“Uh, I guess. You guys too?”

“Of course. The tests are only two weeks away,” Yuigahama declared.

“Man, before you study for your exams, you better brush up your Chiba trivia. That last question was basically giving it you.”

“I don’t particularly think it was giving us anything... it was more of a geography question: ‘Name two of Chiba’s local specialties.’” Yukinoshita uttered the same question from before flatly, as if testing me.

“The correct answer is ‘Chiba’s famous customs: festivals and dancing.’”

“I said ‘local specialties’. I’m quite sure no one would know the lyrics of Chiba’s folk songs.” Yukinoshita was dumbfounded. No, I’m quite sure she knows them. She just couldn’t keep up with the times.

(Incidentally, Chiba's folk songs are sung at the Bon-Odori², and are mostly performed in a way reminiscent of modern gym exercises. Chiba residents can sing and dance to both of them. Yes, you can somehow sing along to a gym exercise despite there being no lyrics to speak of.)

As all of this was going on, the people ahead of us got served, and soon enough it was our turn. At that moment, Yuigahama broke out into a grin. "Hikki, I'll pay for you," she chirped.

"Huh? I said I wasn't bothered... are you going to dress up as my grandmother next? Grandmother, what big teeth you have."

"I'm not the big bad wolf! I'm just trying to be nice even though I don't want to pay for you!"

Did she just dig her own hole? There was no reason why Yuigahama had to treat me in the first place.

Yukinoshita, who was watching our exchange, let out a short sigh in exasperation. "You're being disgraceful, so stop it. I don't like that sort of thing. I despise two-faced people."

For once, I agreed with Yukinoshita. "Yeah. I hate those types too."

² The Bon Festival is a yearly Japanese festival that honours deceased relatives, and the traditional dance that takes place during the festivities is called Bon-Odori.

“Huh?! Th-then I won’t say it, then!” Yuigahama insisted.

“Nah, it’s fine when it’s a joke among people you’re close with,” I said. “I suggest you just say it to people you like in your inner circle?”

“Yes, indeed,” said Yukinoshita. “You’re not in my inner circle, so I don’t mind.”

“I’m kinda shocked that you don’t treat me as part of your inner circle!”
Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita with teary eyes.

Meanwhile, it was my turn to get served. When I ordered a blended coffee, the shop assistant who was capable of making one whipped one up promptly. “That’ll be 390 yen.”

It happened when I put my hand in my pocket. My memories of what had happened just before surfaced in the back of my mind. I’d bought a light novel at the bookstore, and then what? I’d paid 1000 yen, the exact amount of money I had on me, and I’d used up all my change too... which meant I had no money today. But the coffee was already made so it was too late now to refuse it.

I started talking surreptitiously to the two girls behind me. “My bad. I’ve got no money today, teehee. Sorry, but could you pay for me?”

“...despicable.” Yukinoshita wasted no time in labelling me as trash.

Yuigahama sighed, a stunned look on her face. “Huh, guess it can’t be helped.”

...Y-Yuigahama-san! You came for me, my goddess! How I worship thee!

“I’ll have that coffee, so how about you drink water, Hikki?”

...this demon. Was she Lilith or something?

“Hachiman, I-I’ll get it for you! So don’t worry about it, okay?” Totsuka smiled at me kindly.

Totsuka was a total angel.

Just as I was about to hug him, Yukinoshita’s cold voice came in as a wedge between us. “It won’t do him any good if you coddle him.”

“Say that *after* you’ve done something nice to me for once.”

Totsuka ended up paying for me, so I looked around for seats as I thanked him. It was the least I could do while the other three waited for their orders.

At that exact moment, a group of four people vacated their seats, so I slipped into their place without a moment’s delay. I put a tray on the table and hastily flung

my schoolbag down. In my overzealousness, my bag fell under the cushioned seat.

A good-looking schoolgirl sitting on the adjacent seat nudged it back to me. I bowed courteously in response to her uncomplaining, graceful gesture.

“Oh, it’s onii-chan.”

The good-looking girl was my sister, Hikigaya Komachi. Clad in her middle school uniform, she waved at me with a cheerful smile lighting up her face.

It took me a very long moment to respond. “What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“See, I was just listening to Taishi-kun’s problems,” Komachi said as she turned her gaze back to the seat opposite of her. Sitting there was a boy in a middle school uniform.

He quickly ducked his head and bowed in my direction. I eyed him warily without thinking. Just *why* was this boy with Komachi...?

“This is Kawasaki Taishi-kun. I told you about him yesterday, y’know? The guy whose sister became a delinquent.”

Now that she mentioned it, I had a feeling we had a conversation along those lines. Almost all of it had gone in one ear and out the other since I was intent on memorising dates at the time. Just what even happened in the year 694 again...?

“So yeah, he was just asking me how he could get his big sis to go back to how she used to be. Oh, right. You asked about it too, onii-chan. You said I could tell you if I ever had any problems.”

Oh, I somehow got the feeling I might have run my mouth and declared something like that yesterday. “Leave it to me and go on ahead!” or whatever. Yeah, I might intend to do something like that if it was for my sister’s sake, but to completely honest, I had no such intentions when it came to her friends, much less for a *boy*...

“Yeah, I get it. But you know, I reckon he should talk things over with his family without any delay. Yep, in fact, there’s no time to waste.”

I figured I could weasel my way out of this if I strung some pretty-sounding words together. Then I could get rid of Komachi and go home. As those thoughts went through my mind, that Taishi kid started mouthing off like I was his senpai or something.

“You’re right about that, but... lately, nee-chan’s been coming home late and she doesn’t listen to what our parents say at all. She gets angry at me and tells me it’s none of my business when I say something to her...”

Taishi hung his head as he spoke. It seemed he was brooding over it in his own particular way.

“...you’re the only one I can rely on now, onii-san.”

“You have no right to call me onii-san!”

“Why are you shouting things an obstinate father would say?” a cool voice uttered behind me.

I turned around to find Yukinoshita and the others already approaching. Judging them to be my acquaintances from how they wore the same uniform as I did, Komachi wasted no time projecting a businesslike smile.

“Hi there! I’m Hikigaya Komachi. Thanks for being there for my brother,” Komachi greeted them with a knowing smile. One of her special traits since she was little was being able to fit right in wherever she went, often to a baffling degree.

Meanwhile, Taishi-kun, the other customer, preferred to keep to himself. He lowered his head halfway in a dutiful bow and only introduced himself by name.

“You’re Hachiman’s younger sister?” Totsuka said politely. “Pleased to meet you, I’m his classmate. My name’s Totsuka Saika.”

“Oh, you’re so polite, how charming. And oh my, what a cutie. Right, *right*, onii-chan?”

I grunted. “He’s a boy.”

“Haha! Funny joke! Hahaha, what are you saying, my idiot brother?”

“Er, um. I *am* a boy...” Totsuka said shyly as he turned his face away, blushing.

...holy crap! Is this guy really a boy?

“Uh... really?” Komachi asked, nudging me with her elbow.

“Sorry, I wasn’t sure for a moment there, but he’s probably a guy. He’s cute, though.”

“Y-yeah...” Komachi stared straight at Totsuka’s face, only half-convinced. As she murmured stuff like, “What long eyelashes you have. What pretty skin,” Totsuka blushing looked away from her gaze, fidgeting uncomfortably.

I wanted to gaze at Totsuka’s adorable form forever, but when he made eye contact with me as if saying, “Help meeeeeeee...” I tore Komachi away from him.

“That’s enough for now. Anyway, this is Yuigahama and that’s Yukinoshita.”

Komachi finally looked at the two of them after my brief introduction. When their eyes met, Yuigahama laughed nervously. “P-leased to meet you,” she introduced herself. “I’m Hikki’s classmate Yuigahama Yui.”

“Oh, hi, nice to meet you t-” Komachi stopped moving and stared straight at Yuigahama. “Huh...”

Yuigahama avoided her eyes, sweating profusely. What, were they the snake and frog? Their stare down lasted for a whole three seconds until a voice diffused the standstill.

“...are you done yet?” Yukinoshita interjected calmly, having waited patiently for quite some time.

It was amazing how just the sound of her voice made Yuigahama and Komachi shut up and pay attention to her. Her transparently cold voice was extremely quiet and subdued. And yet the message got across, loud and clear. It was like listening to the sound of fresh snow piling up on the ground.

So perhaps it would be more accurate to say that - rather than merely shutting up - they were in awe of her. Komachi opened her eyes wide and sat rooted to the spot in front of Yukinoshita. As she beheld Yukinoshita, she was spellbound for a moment.

“Pleased to meet you. I am Yukinoshita Yukino. Hikigaya-kun is my... what is Hikigaya-kun to me, I wonder...? He is not my classmate, nor is he my friend... I am loath to admit it, but he is my acquaintance, I suppose?”

“Why are you saying that so uncertainly and why are you so ashamed to know me?”

“You see, I was wondering if acquaintance is the proper term. The only thing I know about you, Hikigaya-kun, is your name after all. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I don’t want to know any more about you than that. And yet still I call you my acquaintance.”

What a cruel statement. But when you think about it, the definition of acquaintance is vague too. I don’t even know what a friend is, let alone an acquaintance. Was it really all right to call someone you’d met once an acquaintance? Could you still call them an acquaintance after seeing them countless times? Could you call them an acquaintance regardless of how much information you knew about that person?

Whatever. Using a poorly-defined label wasn’t a great idea. For now, it was best to prioritise the concrete facts.

“Something like ‘fellow student’ is good enough for now.”

“Indeed... then allow me to correct myself. I am loath to admit it, but I am his fellow student Yukinoshita Yukino.”

“You’re still ashamed to know me!” Well, you know what? I’m just as ashamed to know *her*!

“But there’s no other way I could put it.”

“Oh, um, it’s fine. I think I pretty much get what kind of relationship you have with my brother,” Komachi said kindly to the slightly perturbed Yukinoshita. I was grateful my sister was so quick on the uptake, but her sisterly love was sorely lacking, in my opinion.

“...excuse me, but what am I supposed to do?”

I turned my head. “Huh? O-ohhh...”

Taishi-kun was at an impasse, a worried expression on his face. Here he was pouring out his heart to me, but his only acquaintance was Komachi, which made his situation messy and difficult for him. No, honestly, his position was that of an acquaintance of an acquaintance, and it wasn’t like he could follow the strange turns of conversation. To say nothing of the fact that he was surrounded only by people who were older than he was. He really was in a bind. Far from drawing attention to himself by talking out of turn, he was in the sort of position where people asked *him* what his problem was. “Why so quiet?” and so on. If I were in his shoes, I’d want to die. Your only choice is to nod along to the conversation and occasionally laugh and smile awkwardly.

Given all that, the fact that Taishi was determined to speak his mind displayed some impressive communicative powers. I suppose you could say he was a boy with good prospects. (Not that I'd ever let him take care of Komachi, though.)

“Excuse me, I'm Kawasaki Taishi. Nee-chan's an eleventh grader at Soubu High... oh, and her name is Kawasaki Saki. Nee-chan is... how do you put it...? A delinquent? She's turned rotten...?”

I had a memory of hearing that name quite recently. As I stirred the milk in my blended coffee, pondering, I was attacked by an onslaught of memories. The contrast between black and white formed a gradation that stimulated my vision.

...oh, right! The black lace girl!

“You mean the Kawasaki Saki in our class?”

“Kawasaki Saki-san...” Yukinoshita uttered that name and cocked her head slightly, which showed how little she knew about Kawasaki.

But Yuigahama, who was in the same class as Kawasaki, clapped her hands in recognition, just as expect from her. “Oooh. Kawasaki-san, right? She's kinda the scary, delinquent type.”

“You're not friends?” I asked.

“We’ve talked, I guess, but we’re not really *friends*...” Yuigahama responded delicately. “And hey, that’s not something you should ask a girl. It puts us in a hard position.”

Even with girls, there were the groups, cliques, unions, guilds and what have you. Anyway, from the way she spoke, it didn’t seem like Yuigahama’s group had a particularly good rapport with Kawasaki.

“But I’ve never seen Kawasaki-san get along with anyone...” Totsuka remarked. “I feel like she’s always staring blankly out the window.”

“...oh, that’s pretty much what she’s like.” I remembered how Kawasaki Saki acted in the classroom. She was a lone girl with grey eyes who just peered at the moving clouds. Come to think of it, she wasn’t looking at anything in the classroom but rather at some faster-moving place beyond her line of sight.

“So about when did your sister become a delinquent?” Yukinoshita asked Taishi suddenly.

He reacted with a start. “Y-yes’m!”

It should be noted that he was nervous not just because Yukinoshita was scary but because a beautiful older girl was talking to him. It was the correct reaction for a boy in middle school. If I were a middle schooler I’d probably be like that too. But when you become a jaded high school student, you’d realise that she was just plain scary.

“Er, uh... it was probably around the time nee-chan entered Soubu High since she was a super serious student back in middle school. She was relatively nice back then and often made dinner and stuff. She didn’t change much even when she was in her first year of high school... she changed only very recently.”

“So it was when she entered eleventh grade?” I asked, to which Taishi answered in the affirmative.

Upon hearing that, Yukinoshita began to ponder. “In regards to changes when she became an eleventh grader, does anything come to mind?”

“This is just a generic answer, but didn’t she change her class? It was after she entered class F.”

“In other words, it was when she became Hikigaya-kun’s classmate.”

“My, my, why are you saying it like I’m the one who caused it?” I broke in.
“What am I, a virus?”

“I said nothing of the sort. You take your persecution complex too far, Hikigerma.”

“But you said it yourself. You clearly said ‘germ’.”

“A mere slip of the tongue.”

No, seriously, stop it. This was bringing up traumatic memories of being treated as if I had germs. Elementary schoolkids are too cruel. They’d start being all, “*It’s Hikigermaaaaa!*” “*You’re it!*” “*I used a barrier just now!*” just from touching me. “*Barriers don’t work against Hikigerma!*” they said. Just how powerful was the Hikigerma?

Yuigahama looked at Taishi-kun. “But y’know, when you say she comes home late, just what time does she come back? I get home relatively late and stuff too. It’s not so unusual for a high school kid, y’know?”

“Oh, huh, about that.” Taishi-kun looked away, flustered.

I see how it is. He was being shy because an awfully sexy older girl was talking to him. It was the correct reaction for a boy in middle school. When you become a jaded high school student, you come to realise that you can in fact say what you like to a slut.

“But coming home at five o’clock and stuff is too late,” he went on.

“That’s more like morning...” And she’d be late too, oh my. She’d only get around two hours of sleep, if any.

“And your parents don’t say anything to her when she comes home at th-that hour, I take it?” Totsuka asked Taishi worriedly.

“No. Both our parents work, and we have a younger brother and sister, so they don’t really yell at nee-chan. Plus, it’s just so late they rarely see her around anyway... well, I guess bringing up so many kids means you’ve got quite a lot on your plate,” Taishi answered, relatively unshaken.

Hmph, a middle school boy like him had yet to realise Totsuka’s charm. When you become a jaded high school student, you’re bound to realise that Totsuka is, in fact, cute as hell.

“On the odd occasion we do come across each other, we end up fighting, and whenever I say anything, she gets really stubborn and says, ‘It’s got nothing to do with you’...” Taishi’s shoulders drooped. He was greatly perplexed.

“Family reasons, huh...” Yukinoshita said. “Every family has them.”

She had a deep look of melancholy on her face that I had never seen before. She looked just like Taishi, who had come to tell us of his troubles. By that, I mean she was on the verge of tears.

“Yukinoshita...”

But as soon as I called out to her, the clouds covered the sun and a shadow came over her face. Because of that, I couldn't read the expression on Yukinoshita's downturned face clearly. But the mere sight of her feeble, drooped shoulders told me she had let out a short sigh.

"You said something?" Yukinoshita answered me as she lifted her face.

Her expression was no different from normal - cold and withering.

The clouds had only covered the sun for a moment. I had no way of knowing the meaning of the sigh she had breathed in that split second.

The only one who had noticed the change in Yukinoshita's demeanour was me. Taishi and the others went on talking normally.

"And that's not all... nee-chan gets all these phone calls from a weird place."

At Taichi's words, a question mark floated over Yuigahama's head. "Weird places?"

"Mmm. From Angel something-or-other, probably some kind of store... the manager guy talked to her."

"What about it is so weird?" Totsuka asked.

Taishi banged his fist against the table. “I mean think about it! Angel?! It’s a totally sleazy store!”

“Huh, I don’t get that vibe from it at all...” Yuigahama said somewhat hesitantly, but I totally got the vibe.

See, the thing is, my horny middle school boy senses were tingling. Try imagining this “Angel” word displayed in Tokyo’s red-light district. See what I mean? The perverted factor just went up by fifty per cent. And while we’re at it, the word “Super” feels forty per cent more erotic.

Without a doubt, this was one sleazy store.

This brat had realised that, much as you’d expect.

“Hey, calm down for a sec, Taishi,” I said. “I understand everything.”

Delighted at being understood, Taishi wiped passionate tears from the corner of his eyes and embraced me in a passionate hug.

“O-onii-san!”

“Hahaha, did you call me onii-san? Do you have a death wish?”

As the two boys were binding their souls together under the god named Eros, the girls calmly decided on their future plans.

“In any case, if she’s working somewhere, then we need to come up with a special plan,” Yukinoshita said. “Even if it’s not a dangerous store like this idiot seems to believe, the fact that she’s working until dawn is troubling. We need to find out where she’s going and stop her.”

“Yeah, but if we do manage to stop her, she might start a new job somewhere else, y’know?” Yuigahama said.

Komachi nodded in agreement. “Out of the frying pan and into the water.”

“...you mean into the fire,” said Yukinoshita.

Oh, my little sister. I ask of you, please, don’t bring shame to the Hikigaya name. Look, you’re making Yukinoshita feel embarrassed for you.

“In other words, our only option is to simultaneously treat the symptoms and eradicate the root source,” Yukinoshita concluded at approximately the same time I tore Taishi off me.

“Hey, wait a minute here. Are you planning to make us do something?”

“But of course. Kawasaki Taishi-kun is the younger brother of Kawasaki Saki-san, a student of our school. This is to say nothing of how the bulk of his worries concerned her. I believe it is within the Service Club’s line of work.”

“Yeah, but all club activities are suspended for the midterms...”

“Onii-chan.” Someone poked me incessantly in the back. When I turned around, Komachi was smiling broadly at me.

It was Komachi’s smile whenever she asked me to do something for her. A long time ago when Komachi wanted to have my Christmas present, she had this expression on her face too. Why did Santa have to ask for my Love and Berry cards³? There was no way I could fight against Komachi, who held the strongest trump card known as our parents’ sympathy. Damn it, she wasn’t cute at all...

“I’ll do it...” I said reluctantly.

Taishi bowed enthusiastically, like an engine in high gear. “Th-thank you!” he shouted jubilantly. “Sorry for bothering you! I promise to do my best!”

³ *Oshare Majo*: Love and Berry refers to collectible trading cards aimed at little girls.

4-4

The Kawasaki Saki rehabilitation program started the next day forth.

After school, I went to the clubroom where Yukinoshita was waiting imperiously.
“Then let’s begin.”

Yuigahama and I nodded at her words. Oh, and for some reason, Totsuka was there too.

“Totsuka, you don’t have to force yourself to be here.” I mean, it was extremely painful having to put up with Yukinoshita’s tyranny. No doubt he was only here because she had given him the death glare.

But Totsuka shook his head with a smile. “No, it’s okay. I heard about what happened too. Plus, I’m interested in whatever you and the others do, Hachiman... I’d like to go out with you guys if I’m not getting in the way.”

“I-I see. Then... please go out with me.”

I said the “Please go out with me” part reflexively like a charming hunk. See, the thing is, what else can you say when he grabs the sleeve of your jersey, looks up at you with upturned eyes and says he wants to go out with you? I was taking charge like a manly man! ...oh wait, Totsuka was a boy. Damn it.

Since club activities were suspended during the midterms, the schoolyard was empty after school. Besides us, there were the fellow students who were studying individually inside the school, as well as the Kawasaki Saki-types who were getting lectured for being late. (By the way, you got called to the staffroom for a lecture if you were late more than five times in a month.)

Hiratsuka-sensei had probably pinned Kawasaki Saki down and was giving her a thorough talking-to as we spoke.

“I did some thinking and I believe that Kawasaki-san should solve her problems by her own hand,” Yukinoshita declared. “There is little risk if she picked herself up with her own strength as opposed to being forced to do so by someone else, and there is almost no chance of relapse either.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” I agreed.

This isn’t just limited to delinquents, but when other people comment on your actions, it’s really irritating. For example, if someone close to you tried to tell you what to do, you’d start to feel resentful of them. An easy way to think about it is when your mother says to you just before an exam: “How about you get off your arse and study?” In response, you’re usually like, “Oh, geez! I was just about to do it! Oh whoops, there goes my motivation.”

“Okay, so what are we *actually* going to do?” I asked.

“Have you heard of animal therapy?”

Animal therapy is, to put it simply, a type of spiritual therapy that involves petting an animal in order to reduce one's stress levels and to bring out one's positive traits. As Yukinoshita explained the gist of it, I could hear Yuigahama giggling. But in my opinion, it wasn't really a bad way of going about things. From what Taishi said, Kawasaki was once a straight-laced and kind-hearted girl. This might be the impetus to bring out her kind-hearted side.

But there was one problem.

“Who's providing the animal?” I asked.

“About that... does no one here own a cat?” Yukinoshita asked.

Totsuka shook his head glumly in response. Aww, couldn't I keep him? He was just so cute. He's super effective!

“I have a dog, is that okay?” Yuigahama pointed her little finger and her index finger up and made a hand sign with her thumb, middle finger and ring finger. That's a fox, not a dog¹.

“Cats are more likable,” Yukinoshita insisted.

¹ The sign in question: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/95/Ki-jsl-yubimoji.png/170px-Ki-jsl-yubimoji.png>

“I don’t really get the difference...” I mumbled. “Seriously, what scientific reasoning do you have?”

“None in particular.” Yukinoshita neatly avoided my gaze. “In any case, dogs are a no-go.”

“So does that mean you don’t like dogs?”

“I never said anything of the sort, I believe. Please stop jumping to conclusions,” Yukinoshita said testily.

Yuigahama was the one who jumped to conclusions. “No way, Yukinon. You hate dogs? How could you?! Don’t you like cute animals?!”

“...you feel that way because you love dogs, Yuigahama-san.” The tone of Yukinoshita’s voice had suddenly become flat.

What, did she have some kind of trauma involving dogs or something? Did she get bitten by one in her past? Meh, if she didn’t like it, I guess I shouldn’t push it. For now, I was just gleeful that I knew one of Yukinoshita’s weak points.

“We own a cat,” I said. “Is ours all right?”

“Yes.”

With Yukinoshita's approval under my belt, I rang Komachi. I could hear some weird music in the background. What was with that cheesy music? Why was this chick's cell phone singing?

"Yeeeeees, this is Komachi!"

"Oh, Komachi. You at home right now?"

"Yep, I am. What of it?"

"It's about the cat. Sorry, but could you take it to our school?"

"Huh? Why? Ka-kun's heavy, so I don't wanna."

Ka-kun is the name of our cat. He used to be called Kamakura, but because that was too much of a mouthful it got shortened at some point. His name was derived from how round like a *kamakura* he was².

"Er, you see, Yukinoshita said to bring him."

"I'll be right there." The phone suddenly cut off with a beep.

² A kamakura is a kind of round igloo-like snow house that is used as an altar to pray to the water deity.

(...huh? Why did her attitude change as soon as I mentioned Yukinoshita? She'd been so reluctant when I asked!)

I closed my phone, satisfied she would come. Our high school was well-known in this area, so she probably wouldn't get lost coming here.

"She said she'll be right here," I informed Yukinoshita. "Shall we wait outside?"

We waited outside the school gates for twenty minutes, upon which Komachi appeared with a carry casket in hand.

"I apologise for calling you out here," Yukinoshita said.

"No, no, I'm happy to do it for you, Yukino-san," Komachi answered smilingly as she opened the lid of her carry bag.

Kamakura was enshrined inside. He scowled at me openly with a "Huh? Whatchu lookin' at, punk?" sort of look on his face. Not the cutest of felines.

"Aww, he's so cute!" Totsuka said as he stroked the cat. Kamakura twisted his body as if to say, "Hey, hey, calm down! Hang on a minute! Not my stomach! Anywhere but there!" He was totally at Totsuka's mercy.

“So, what are you gonna with him?” I held Kamakura by the scruff of his neck once Totsuka handed him over to me. (Incidentally, that is the wrong way to hold a cat. The right way is to cradle it in your arms.)

“We’ll put him in a cardboard box and leave him in front of Kawasaki-san,” Yukinoshita explained. “I’m sure Kawasaki-san will pick him up if her heart is moved.”

“She’s not an old-time banchou³.” If she thought delinquent = cat lover, then she had another thing coming. What a sheltered way of thinking.

And really, we didn’t even know Kawasaki that well, so there was no guarantee such an indirect method would even work.

“Now then, I’ll bring some cardboard.” I motioned to give my cat to Yuigahama, who was right next to me. But she took a step back in alarm.

…just take it already. I tried again, this time calling out her name as I held Kamakura out. Again, Yuigahama swerved to avoid him.

“What the hell…”

³ A leader of delinquents. Frequently depicted in fiction as tough guys with a heart of gold.

“Oh. Er, uh, it’s nothing!” Yuigahama said as she extended her arms nervously. Kamakura eyed her hands and let out a meow. With a flinch, Yuigahama dropped her hands.

“Could it be... you’re not good with cats?”

“H-huh?! O-of course I’m good with cats! In fact, I love ‘em! I-I mean, c’mere, little kitty. Meow meow.” Her voice was shaking. Not that there was really any reason for her to be afraid.

“Komachi, I’ll leave him to you.” I handed Kamakura over to Komachi. As I did so, Kamakura suddenly let out a purr as if he was in a good mood. *Shit, I’m hated even by cats.* “Well, I’m off.”

There was probably some cardboard in the office, I figured. Cats had boxes they liked and boxes they hated, but our cat was okay with most varieties. Oh, and our cat loved plastic for some reason, and he was often chewing on the plastic wrappings of my comic books. I had to wonder if it was seriously that appetising.

Come to think of it, where was I going to even get a plastic bag? As I paced around, wondering how I would please my cat, Yuigahama caught up to me quickly.

“Um, you know. I really don’t hate cats.”

“Hm? Well, I don’t really care either way. Yukinoshita’s the type who hates dogs, you know. I don’t really like bugs myself.”

Or human beings, for that matter.

“No, I mean I really don’t hate cats. I think they’re cute.”

“So? You got a cat allergy or something?”

“That’s not it... you see, my cat ran away, y’know? That’s why I kinda get sad about it.”

Yuigahama spoke meekly, the exact opposite of her usual cheerfulness. There was a wistful look in her eyes. Her walking pace slowed, and naturally I slowed down with her.

“I used to live in a multi-apartment complex, you see. It was really popular to hide a cat and raise it in your apartment.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of that...”

“That’s what it was like for kids who live in an apartment! You can’t keep a pet in an apartment, y’know? So I kept a stray cat without telling my parents. But at some point, it went away...” Yuigahama trailed off.

And thus, she got bad at handling cats.

Yuigahama laughed in her usual sheepish way. I wondered what her younger self had thought of that separation. Perhaps she had thought it was such a cute cat and they got along so well, so she might have been at a loss over why it ran away. It must have felt like a betrayal.

But the girl she was today knew why. I heard that a cat leaves its owner when it's about to die. Given that, I wondered how the grown Yuigahama looked back on her parting regrets. Perhaps she was full of regrets.

That was only my speculation. The truth might be a different matter altogether. But even so, I thought Yuigahama's sadness and her kindness were genuine.

Silently, without uttering a single word to each other, we carried the cardboard between us. It wasn't even that heavy.

4-5

When we put Kamakura into the cardboard box, he tried touching it with his front paw. When he smoothed the ground three times, he purred contentedly as if to say, “Heh... good enough.”

Now then, all we needed to do was wait for Kawasaki Saki’s appearance. The problem was that we didn’t know when she would turn up. The length of Hiratsuka-sensei’s lectures depended on her whims.

“Let’s divide the duties,” Yukinoshita proposed, taking charge. She made Totsuka lie in wait in front of the staffroom, while Yuigahama was stationed by the side of the bicycle parking area. Komachi was on patrol. And I was ordered to carry the cardboard box around and run around.

When you think about it, the others had their jobs, but I had nothing to do until Kawasaki Saki was spotted. While I was on standby, I fostered my great willpower and went off to buy a Sportop carton from the nearby vending machine. As I put my straw in and took one or two sips, I returned to my station.

“Meow.” I heard Kamakura’s familiar meowing.

“Meow.” I heard a girl’s unfamiliar meowing.

I checked my surroundings reflexively, but there was no other girl besides Yukinoshita in the vicinity. For now, I called out to the girl whose back was turned to me.

“...what are you doing?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?” Yukinoshita answered innocently.

“Nothing, just you were talking to the cat just now.”

“More importantly, I’m quite certain I ordered you to be on standby, but it seems following a simple instruction is beyond your abilities. I took your level of incompetence into account, but honestly you have surpassed my calculations. I wonder how I can phrase my orders to make them simple enough for someone stupider than a grade schooler to understand.”

Yukinoshita was fifty per cent colder than normal and her tone was ruthless. Her eyes were telling me that I was dead if I uttered another word.

“G-got it. I’ll go back to standby...”

As I slinked back to the bench I had been waiting at, my cell phone started buzzing. It was an unknown caller. Given the timing, it could only be Yuigahama or Komachi or Totsuka - or perhaps Yukinoshita.

I knew Yuigahama and Komachi's numbers and there was no way Yukinoshita would give me a call after what happened just before.

...so that meant it was from Totsuka?!

"H-hello?!"

"Oh, is this onii-san? I asked for your number from Hikigaya-san."

"I don't have a brother or a brother-in-law."

I ended the call right then and there, but another call came in no time. Even without seeing his face, I knew he was the persistent sort, so I gave in.

"Hey, why did you hang up?!"

"What do you want?"

"It's just that I heard about the cat and, well, nee-chan has a cat allergy."

Silence. Our plan was screwed.

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

“Sorry, I only just heard.”

“Geez, I get it, I get it. Thanks for filling us in. Later.”

I snapped the phone shut once and for all and hurried to where Yukinoshita was. Yukinoshita was crouched in front of Kamakura and tickling Kamakura’s neck. Kamakura was curling into a ball.

“Yukinoshita,” I called out to her.

Yukinoshita let go of the cat all of a sudden and only glared at me with “What is it now?” written across her face. *Geez, let it go already.* The way she kept glaring at me would only make me remember what happened before.

“I just got a call from Taishi and it turns out Kawasaki has a cat allergy. So I don’t reckon she’d pick the cat up even if we left it here.”

“…huh. That’s a spanner in the works,” Yukinoshita said as she stroked Kamakura’s head sadly in parting. *Meow.*



When I contacted the others to tell them that we'd given up, Yuigahama, Totsuka and Komachi returned.

"Onii-chan, you got a call from Kawasaki-kun?" Komachi asked.

"Er, yeah." Then I said, "Don't go giving phone numbers away to strangers. What if something dangerous happens? Be careful when you handle personal information."

"Hikigaya-kun's personal details aren't such a big deal," Yukinoshita teased me, but only half-jokingly.

"It's not for me, it's for Komachi. You hear me? Don't you give your number away lightly, okay? Especially to boys."

"No way, you saw right through me?" Komachi deflected my warning with a laugh. Well, my little sister was one of those "spare me the details" types. That didn't stop her from being far superior to me at these sorts of things.

(Or rather, I was the one who had to catch up.)

Now that the animal therapy operation had failed, we had to come up with another plan. Not having a plan of my own, I looked to Yukinoshita. When I did, she looked at Komachi and me in turn and let out a soft sigh.

“...you get along well as siblings.” She hesitated. “I’m somewhat jealous.”

“Huh? Oh, people say that a lot when they’re an only child. It’s not such a great thing.”

“No, I...” Yukinoshita trailed off, which was rare for her. Usually, she declared whatever was on her mind, even at the expense of hurting others. “No, never mind.”

Had she eaten something bad, like one of Yuigahama’s cookies or something?

“Now then, what are we gonna do? We gotta think of something.”

“Er, uh...” Totsuka raised his hand timidly. He looked at both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama with an uncertain look in his eyes, as if he wanted to contribute something but wasn’t sure how to go about it.

Go ahead and say it, I thought. Even if no one else would accept him, I would! For example, I would even accept this unacceptable love!

“Go ahead,” said Yukinoshita. “I don’t mind if you speak your mind. It would help us all out.”

“Okay then... so um, how about you tell Hiratsuka-sensei about it? I think she might be too close to her parents to tell them her problems. But if she were talking to another adult, she might be able to confide her problems, maybe?”

Oh, what a great call. Indeed, she might not be able to talk to her parents *because* they were her parents. For example, I would have absolutely no desire to talk to my parents about porn or romance. Also, I wouldn't tell them if I went to school and there was graffiti on my desk, or if there was rubbish in my shoe locker, or if I received a love letter and got worked up over it, only to find out it was a classmate's prank.

That's why a third party was necessary. A reliable person with an abundance of life experience might be able to pitch in and help.

“But Hiratsuka-sensei, you say...” There was a worrying factor in there. Could you really call such a pitiful person an adult? The only thing that was adult about her was her chest.

“Compared to other teachers, Hiratsuka-sensei is very in touch with her students,” Yukinoshita declared. “There is no better person for the job.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess.” Just like Yukinoshita said, Hiratsuka-sensei really did work hard in guiding her students. She directed students who were wrapped up in their worries to the Service Club, and on a daily level she connected with the students. She could probably do what we needed of her since she was highly observant and all. “Then I'll try contacting her.”

I explained the gist of the Kawasaki Saki situation in my text message. Hiratsuka-sensei's phone address, which I had absolutely no use or desire for, had come in handy for once.

"That's about it. I told her we'll explain more at the entrance. Okay, that'll make her come."

After I closed off the email, we waited for five minutes.

We heard the stiff sound of her heels scratching against the floor, signalling Hiratsuka-sensei's appearance.

"Hikigaya, I understand the situation," she said with a serious face. "I'll hear out the details." She put out the cigarette she had been smoking on a portable ash tray.

I explained what we knew about Kawasaki Saki, as well as what we had surmised. Hiratsuka-sensei listened silently until I finished, upon which she let out a short, terse sigh.

"The fact that a student of our school is working at a part-time job past midnight is a serious matter. We need to deal with this quickly before it escalates any further. I'll handle it." Hiratsuka-sensei cackled in a rather unprofessional way. "What are you looking at? I let Kawasaki go just before I came here. And it took another two minutes to come here."

...what was this indescribable unease that come over me? Her entire manner reeked of schadenfreude.

“Um, you do know you’re not allowed to punch or kick her?”

“Impossible... you do realise I only do that kind of thing to you?”

“No, that’s not romantic at all.”

As this was going on, Kawasaki Saki appeared at the entrance. She dragged her feet lazily and occasionally let out a wide yawn. She slung her schoolbag over her shoulder listlessly as if she didn’t give a crap about anything. Her elbows were swinging back and forth idly.

“Hold it right there, Kawasaki,” Hiratsuka-sensei called out authoritatively to her back. The sound of her voice shook the ground roughly.

At that, Kawasaki turned around, her eyes narrowing half-way as if she was glaring. As she turned around, she stooped over in a smooth motion.

Hiratsuka-sensei was tall as well, but she was inferior to Kawasaki. Her long legs, covered loosely by her boots, kicked a small rock smartly.

“...you want something?” Kawasaki said belligerently in a husky “I don’t give a shit” tone. The way she spoke so bluntly was scary. She wasn’t the delinquent or yankee “I’ll beat the shit outta you!”-type of scary. She was the older woman in a sleazy bar kind of scary. She had the kind of vibe of a person sitting at the corner of the counter, smoking and holding whisky in one hand.

On the other hand, Hiratsuka-sensei’s entire body was also emitting a similar scary aura. She was scary the way a tired old man is when he helps himself to a bottle of beer as he’s eating his fifth helping of soba at a Chinese cookery in front of the station in the sleazy part of town, yelling things like, “He’s hopeless! What a shit pitcher!” at the relay broadcast of baseball. What was this, the clash of the titans?

“Kawasaki, I hear you’ve been coming home late these days - that you’ve been coming back in the early hours of the morning. Just what are you doing and where?”

“Did someone tell you that?”

“My client information is strictly confidential. Now answer my question,” Hiratsuka-sensei said in her take-no-shit tone.

Kawasaki sighed languidly. From the looks of it, she was ridiculing sensei. “Nothing much. Does it really matter where I go? Not like I’m getting in anyone’s way.”

“But you *might* in the future. You won’t be a high school student forever. Don’t you see there are people watching out for you? Like your parents and me,” Hiratsuka-sensei insisted.

But Kawasaki only looked at her with a bored expression.

Losing patience, Hiratsuka-sensei grabbed Kawasaki by the arm. “Have you never considered how your parents are feeling?” she demanded seriously, clinging as if she would never let go.

Her touch was probably warm and tender. I wondered if her passionate feelings would melt Kawasaki’s heart.

“Sensei...” Kawasaki whispered, touching Hiratsuka-sensei’s hand and looking straight into her eyes.

Then-

“Like I know how my parents feel. And anyway, there’s no way you could know since you’ve never been a parent either, sensei. Shouldn’t you only say that stuff after you get married and have kids yourself?”

“Uuuuurk!”

Kawasaki had turned the tables completely. Hiratsuka-sensei lost her footing like a boxer hit by a sucker punch. She was receiving a considerable amount of damage. It seemed her feelings hadn't gotten across.

“Sensei, you should worry about your own future before you worry about mine. Like getting married and stuff.”

Hiratsuka-sensei's body keeled over at the continued pummelling. Her knees were trembling. *So the damage had reached her legs, huh...* The impact reached her hips, her shoulders and all the way up to her voice box. She croaked, but no words came out. Her eyes were watering.

The callous Kawasaki paid no heed and disappeared into the bicycle parking area. We all looked at each other wordlessly, not knowing what to say. Yuigahama and Komachi gazed pointedly at the ground, while Totsuka muttered, “Poor sensei,” to himself.

Then Yukinoshita crouched down. It was as if she was trying to avoid making a presence of herself.

Why? Why was it up to me to do something? I thought. As I watched my teacher's pitiful state, I felt compelled to say something. Could it be... that I was feeling sorry for her?

“Er, uh... sensei?” I said, trying to think of comforting words.

Sensei turned around stiffly like she was a zombie. She sniffed. "I'm going home..." she said in a thin, trembling voice as she rubbed her eyes with the sides of her thumbs.

And then, without even waiting for my response, she began making her way unsteadily towards the car park.

"Y-you tried your best." As I watched her lone figure stumbling in the distance, the afternoon glow from the sun stung my eyes and caused tears to sprout.

Someone marry her already, please.

4-6

An hour after Hiratsuka-sensei disappeared into the evening sun and became a single glittering star in the night sky, we were at Chiba station.

Komachi took our cat Kamakura home. It was too soon for a middle school student like Komachi to go to Chiba's central business district. Eating with her friends at the 14th Yokado food court suited her better¹. But seriously, what would a middle schooler see in Yokado? I developed a hatred for it from the times I went shopping there with my mother. Mothers are better off going to somewhere like Mother Park².

Anyway, the time was already close to 7:30 pm. It was around the time when the city became bustling with nightly activity.

“Inside Chiba's central business district, only two restaurants with ‘Angel’ in their names operate until the early hours of the morning, it seems,” I said.

“And this is one of those places?” Yukinoshita looked suspiciously at the neon lights shining on a sign with “Maid Café Angel” written on it. On the side, there were even illustrations of a beckoning girl with cat ears that read: “Welcome back, woof 🐾”

¹ The biggest retailer in Japan.

² A Japanese theme park.

“What the hell is this?” was written all over Yukinoshita’s face.

I felt the same way. What the hell *was* this? *Welcome back, woof, meow?* Did they think they were dogs or cats? And even the name “Angel” reeked of stupidity. The angel part had nothing to do with what the store was about.

“So there’s a maid café in Chiba...” Yuigahama looked at the building incredulously.

“You’re so naïve, Yuigahama. There’s nothing Chiba doesn’t have. Misunderstanding trends and latching onto them is what Chiba is all about. See, it has quite an unfortunate look about it. That’s Chiba quality for you.”

That’s right. You could say Chiba is a very unfortunate prefecture. The Narita International Airport, the Tokyo Game Show, Country Farm Tokyo German Village, “Chiba’s Shibuya” - these bizarre novelties were a result of Chiba’s fixation on trends, usually thanks to Tokyo’s influence. Adapting and adding to things was what Chiba was all about. When you think about the existence of the One Hundred Hills, Chiba’s exclusive residential district, you could say that fixation has already led to Chiba playing second fiddle to the rest of the world.

And so in the centre of the Keisei-Chiba line, animation gathered indiscriminately in one place, forming the heart of a certain type of Chiba subculture. AKI-BA rhymes with CHI-BA, after all. Thus it was natural we would have maid cafés here.

“I don’t really know much about these things but... um, what kind of shop is a maid café?” Totsuka scrutinised the lettering on the sign over and over again, but he couldn’t make sense of it. I suppose he would have had no clue even it had *“Shall we spend MOE MOE maid time together?”* written on it. *“How do you spend maid time?”* he would be asking. *“Is that supposed to be a maid?”*

“Oh, since I’ve actually never been to one, I can’t say...” I admitted. “So I called a guy who knows this sort of stuff in detail.”

“Oho. You called, Hachiman.”

As if on cue, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru appeared at the ticket barrier in the middle of the Keisei-Chiba station. He was wearing a coat even though it was early summer, and sweat dripped down his forehead as he laughed sonorously. Crystals of salt flew off the collar of his coat. You know, if this were Ancient China, he’d be executed for illegally manufacturing salt.

“Whoa...” Yuigahama grimaced slightly.

But it would be hard to blame her for doing that. The reason for that was because I was grimacing even harder than she was.

“Why do you have that look on your face when you’re the one who called me?” Zaimokuza demanded.

“Oh, you see, *someone* had to do it, but I was just thinking what a pain in the arse you are.”

“I understand,” said Zaimozuka, laughing evilly. All it did was make his voice sound annoyingly high-pitched. *Get lost already.* “Indeed, it is difficult to suppress one’s true strength when battling one’s fated enemy. You must embrace your hatred a hundred times over!”

“Yep, yep. That’s why you’re a pain in the arse.”

I really didn’t want to call him, but the only two people I knew who understood this stuff in detail were Zaimokuza and Hiratsuka-sensei. But Hiratsuka-sensei knew more about shonen manga than *that* kind of stuff, so that left me with only one option.

I’d already conveyed the particulars to Zaimokuza over text. About the time Kawasaki Saki was going home, how we thought she was working at a place with “Angel” in the name, and about her personality. Zaimokuza’s response to that information was a single: “Maid Café Angel”.

“Zaimokuza, are you sure this is the place?”

“Oh, without a doubt.”

Zaimokuza furiously pressed buttons on his smart phone and revealed the information google-fu taught him with a dramatic flourish. Smart phones are handy, but if you use them for every little thing in your life, your fingers are bound to get tired. The Ubiquitous Computing Technology Corporation was a company that created cushions for your fingers when you overused them on a smart phone.

“According to this, there are two possible candidates in this city. And in Kawasaki’s case, we must certainly pick this destination. I hear it in my ghost³.” Zaimozuka’s answer was brimming with confidence.

I gulped. “How do you know?”

Could it be that this guy had grabbed hold of some unique insight? Zaimokuza was grinning from ear to ear.

Ah, this guy didn’t have confidence in himself, I thought. What he had was conviction.

“Well, be silent and come... I can make the maids fawn over you,” he said as he tugged on his coat with a flourish. I could see the wind causing his coat to curl up.

This guy...

³ A quote from *Ghost in the Shell*.

If he could say all that, then surely I could follow him. To that promised land, a place overflowing with milk and honey - the Holy Harem Kingdom⁴!

As my heart throbbed in anticipation of what those maids would do for me, I took a step forward. It was one small step for mankind, one giant leap for me.

Someone yanked on my blazer. I turned around to see Yuigahama gazing at me with a sullen face.

She said nothing for a moment.

“...what is it?” I demanded.

“Nothing much. Thought you didn’t go to that kind of shop either, Hikki.” She kneaded my blazer incessantly with her fingertip, a mysteriously sullen expression on her face. “Bad feeling.”

Quit touching me. You’ll ruin my blazer.

“...I don’t even get what you’re saying. Use the subject-verb-noun structure in your sentences.”

⁴ A reference to *Shinsei Motemote Oukoku*, a gag manga about an alien who wants to be popular with girls.

“I mean, isn’t this a place guys go to? What are we girls gonna do?”

Hm? Oh yeah, come to think of it, did girls even go to maid cafés? Thinking Zaimokuza-sensei would teach me, I glanced in his direction. Zaimokuza-sensei had his arms folded in a “leave it to me!” kind of manner as he cried out in a high-pitched voice. “Fear not, mademoiselle!”

“Who’s a madder mozell...?” I actually knew what he said, but I didn’t want to admit it.

“I figured something like this would happen, so I brought maid outfits to use as infiltration devices,” he said as he whipped out a maid outfit from behind his back, along with a cleaner’s plastic bag filled with sanitary products. Seriously, there was a metal bat and a frying pan in there too.

“Ohohohoho. Now then, Sir Totsuka, shall we be off...?”

I saw what you did there. G’job.

“H-huh? What do I have to...?” Totsuka took one step and then another in his attempt to get away from Zaimokuza, who was slowly sidling up to him.

Seriously, what was with his horror movie-like reactions? On a normal day, I would have punched Zaimokuza in the stomach and rescued Totsuka like the hero I was, but today, that was the only action I could not bring myself to do.

I-I kind of wanted to see him in a maid outfit...

Finally, Zaimokuza cornered Totsuka by the wall. At that exact moment, the backlight made Zaimokuza look like a genuine monster.

“Now then, Sir Totsuka... I have you now, my pretty!”

As the creature brandishing a maid outfit with one hand loomed before a teary-faced Totsuka, Totsuka shook his head frantically. “No, no... please...”

But even as he knew resistance was futile, Totsuka attempted to deny the reality before him and scrunched his eyes shut, large tears collecting in his eyes.

It happened then.

“Okay, okay, okaaaay! I wanna try putting it on! It’s so cute!” Yuigahama said as she swiped the maid outfit from Zaimokuza’s hand.

“...keh,” Zaimokuza spat.

Yuigahama regarded that gesture with keen annoyance and glared at Zaimokuza with a “what an annoying, pathetic virgin!” look on her face.

“Huh, what’s with that attitude? You’re pissing me off,” spat Yuigahama.

On a normal day, Zaimokuza would have coughed exaggeratedly and made a run for it, but because he was compelled by the power of maid outfits, his pointless self-assurance from earlier returned to the fore. “Hmph, that is not what being a maid is all about. What you call being a maid is merely donning a costume. You lack the soul.”

“What the hell? I have no idea what you’re saying...” Yuigahama looked at me for help, but this was one situation where I refused to step in.

You see, it was because I completely understood what Zaimokuza was saying. “No, I get it. How do I put it? You’d look completely out-of-place even if you did wear a maid outfit. If you were wearing it at the school festival dance, you’d only see angry college student types.”

Honestly, since those events were only for looking down on otaku and maids as well as those who gathered around it, I wondered what was so great about worshipping and devoting oneself to maid outfits. It seemed like a nice feeling from afar.

“You might wear the cosplay, but your heart is not dressed up! Come back after you have read *Shirley*⁵! People like you mess up your cosplays at Comiket and smoke calmly in the smoking area!”

⁵ A manga drawn by Kaoru Mori, the artist of *Victorian Romance Emma*, and is also about maids.

Yuigahama dropped behind three paces at Zaimokuza's frenzied spiel. Groaning audibly, she looked around restlessly for an ally. Then she ducked behind trusty Yukinoshita's back.

Yukinoshita, who had become Yuigahama's shield, let out a short, terse sigh and pointed at the "Maid Café Angel" sign.

"It seems they welcome girls here too," she said.

When I looked at the letters she was pointing at, I saw it was indeed written there: *Girls welcome too! Dress up as a maid!*

Holy crap, that sign wasn't lying. It really was maid time.

4-7

The five of us walked into “Maid Café Angel”. There, we received the standard “Welcome back, master! Enjoy your stay!” greeting and were directed to a table. Yuigahama and Yukinoshita were accumulating their maid experience, so only Totsuka, Zaimokuza and I were shown to our seats.

“Please take a seat, master,” said a lady wearing glasses with red frames and a pair of cat ears as she handed us a menu.

A bunch of stuff was listed on the menu in cursive script like “Omu Omu Omulette Rice” and “White Curry ☆” and “Kyururun Cake” . And besides the default menu, various options like the Tokyo-Chiba Line version of Moe Moe Rock-Paper-Scissors were written down. But wait, why did they only charge money for the rock-paper-scissors option? The bubble economy only seemed to apply here.

I decided to leave all this incomprehensible option-picking stuff to Zaimokuza, who had taken his seat. As I faced him, he looked around, paled visibly and drank water at a rapid pace. He hadn’t uttered a single word this whole time.

“Oj, what’s wrong?”

“Hmph... I was so sure of myself before I entered this shop, but now I am apprehensive, for I cannot converse smoothly with the maids.”

“...that so?”

Zaimokuza's hand was trembling violently as he picked up his glass cup, but I decided to ignore him. There was one more character that just wouldn't open his mouth, so this time I decided to speak to him.

“Totsuka, you're in a maid café, you know.”

Totsuka made no reaction.

“T-Totsuka?”

Yet again, he ignored me. On a normal day, he would have talked to me and smiled at me, beaming like the sun! Totsuka was being completely tsun and shunning me today, and he didn't even nod or anything.

“What, are you mad?” I asked as I promptly prepared to plunge my fork into the base of my neck if he ignored me this time too.

Totsuka finally opened his mouth this time. “You didn't save me before,” he said after a pause.

“Huh? Ohh, uh, you see, that is...”

“...you wanted me to wear such a cutesy outfit even though I’m a boy.” Totsuka looked at me, pouting.

(...his angry face was cute.)

Oh, shit. Totsuka was a boy. And plus, I didn’t really like it when he got all mad at me and said things a girl would say. That being the case, I could restrain myself from messing with him any further.

“That is, well, you see, it’s kind of a joke between men - like wolves tricking each other, I guess?”

“...really?”

“Really. I swear it on my honour as a man.”

Anyway, I had to give him a manly push. This was a man-to-man talk, with emphasis on the MAN.

“Th-then I’ll forgive you...” Totsuka said finally, blushing.

“Sorry. I’ll treat you to a cappuccino to make up for it. All Italian guys drink it, you know.”

“Okay, thanks!”

I managed to fix Totsuka’s mood by sticking to my guns and appealing to Totsuka’s manliness. Now that I was the recipient of Totsuka’s beaming smile, I could not have been in a better mood. I rang the bell on the table.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Master.”

“Oh, I’ll have two cappuccinos, thanks.”

“We can draw cats on your coffees, if that is what you so wish, Master. Would you like that?”

“Er, no thanks.”

I refused the offer, but without any hint of annoyance, the maid smiled serenely. “I understand. Please wait a moment,” she sang. In tavern terms, it sort of felt like she said, “Sure thing, mate!” It was just what you’d expect from a pro. Their movements were always brisk and energetic.

The reason the maid café was so popular was probably not because of superficial words like “moe moe” or “master”, but because of this “let’s do anything and everything to have a fun time” kind of in-your-face fanservice spirit. Playing rock-paper-scissors with you and drawing pictures on your omelette rice was a form of expressing their hospitality.

That said, among them was a maid who was horrifically awful at the whole role-playing thing. Her hands shook as she held the tray and she took wobbling steps because she could clearly see the cups spilling. At this rate, she'd definitely fall over and I'd be able to see her panties. I'm talking about Yuigahama, by the way.

"S-sorry to keep you waiting," she said extremely embarrassedly as she set the cup on the table. Her face was bright red. "M-Master," she added after a long pause.

She was wearing a relatively plain, mainstream maid outfit. The basic black and white frills were attached, and her shirt was too short to boot, which really emphasised her bust.

There was silence for a long moment.

"D-does it suit me?" As she set the tray on the table, she twirled around at a deliberate speed. Her decorative ribbon and frills were fluttering.

"Whoa, you're so cute, Yuigahama-san," Totsuka remarked. "Right, Hachiman?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah. I guess," I answered vaguely.

But even with my half-assery, Yuigahama smiled happily as if I had praised her.



“I see... that’s nice to hear... ehehe, thanks.”

Honestly, I was surprised.

She was clumsy as usual, but I got a completely different impression of Yuigahama now that I saw her acting subserviently with a somewhat bashful look on her face.

“Yeah, but you know, the skirt on this maid outfit is short and these socks go up to my knees, so it must’ve been really tough on the people who wore these a long time ago. If you wore this and tried to clean, you’d get dust all over yourself like a Quickle Wiper.”

I take back what I said. She was just Yuigahama Yui.

“You’d be cute if you didn’t open your mouth,” I said.

“Wha-?! What are you implying?!” She hit me with a scone and tray. So she was laying a hand on her master, huh...

“What are you wasting time for...?” a cold voice said, making me turn around.

Behind me was a maid from the era of the British Empire.

A long skirt with long sleeves coloured a dark kind of moss green, and a black ribbon tied up in one neat bow. Her sombre image, coupled with her modest dress code, oozed with splendour.

“Whoa, Yukinon, you look amazing! Those clothes suit you like crazy. You’re so pretty...” Yuigahama sighed deeply in admiration.

Just as Yuigahama said, the clothes really did suit Yukinoshita. “Yeah, but you’ve got more of a Rottenmeier look to you than a maid...” I thought it was a pretty good reference, but it evidently went right over Yukinoshita and Yuigahama’s heads since they cocked their heads in puzzlement. “I’m saying it suits you...”

“I see. Well, I suppose it doesn’t particularly matter...” Yukinoshita answered indifferently.

Incidentally, Rottenmeier is the elderly housekeeper from *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*. You could call her a maid too, I suppose. Other than that, she looked like someone from a haunted mansion.

“Kawasaki-san does not appear to be in this shop,” Yukinoshita remarked.

“You really did your homework, huh...?”

“Of course. I wore these clothes for that reason.”

Yukinoshita was the only one who actually took the infiltration mission seriously. It was the birth of the maid detective. So why was it that I only had Totsuka's mood on my mind...?

"So she's not just taking a day off?" Yuigahama asked.

Yukinoshita shook her head. "Her name wasn't on the shift schedule. Considering how she received a call at her own home, we can rule out the possibility that she was using a false name."

If she'd gone that far, she was no regular maid. She was basically a ninja maid.

"So in that case, we were fed false information..." I threw a glare at Zaimokuza, who was sitting next to me.

At that, Zaimokuza cocked his head and started moaning. "How weird... there's no way that could be..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ahem." Zaimokuza coughed before he went on. "A tsuntsun girl who works in secret at a maid café and goes, 'Meow meow! Welcome back, Master... huh, what are you doing here?!' is how it's supposed to go - or should I say *destined* to go?!"

“I have no idea what the hell you’re saying.”

I didn’t give a crap about Zaimokuza’s inclinations. Thanks to him, we wasted a whole day. It was getting considerably late, and there’d be no point going home, only to go back out again.

But oh well, Yuigahama seemed happy enough at trying out a maid outfit and plus I found a good café. That was the end of that for now.

4-8

The day after we went to the maid café, the number of people in the clubroom was a record high. We wracked our brains together because according to Yukinoshita, when treating the symptoms was ineffective, you had to change perspective and aim for eradicating the root source of the problem.

I knew that Yukinoshita and I - and maybe Yuigahama too - were club members. It also wasn't so mysterious to see Totsuka and Zaimokuza here since they visited from time to time. One other person was present even though it was unusual for him to be here, and mysteriously enough, he blended into the surroundings.

“What brought you here, Hayama?” I asked.

Hayama was reading a book by the window pane. *Oi, give me a break*, I thought. What was one of those nice guy jock-types even doing reading a book? I bet that wasn't all he was capable of. When I called out to him, Hayama closed his book and waved his hand in a self-effacing gesture.

“You see, Yui called me here...”

“Yuigahama did?”

I turned around to see Yuigahama with her chest puffed up with pride for some reason.

“Yep, I kinda thought about it, and don’t you think there has to be some kinda reason Kawasaki-san changed? So I thought it would be good to get rid of the cause but, like, that’s kinda hard to do when no one tells us what that cause is, ya know?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Miraculously enough, Yuigahama’s argument made logical sense. Enthralled by this minor miracle, I could only grunt in response. As a result of the ego stroking, Yuigahama puffed out her chest even further until I swear she was looking up at the ceiling.

“I know, right?! That’s why we need to think of something to counter it. If she changed for the worse once, then we can change her for the better this time.”

She was one of those “two wrongs make a right” sorts of people. She had to be more of a stooge than the Three Stooges.

“So, why was it necessary to call Hayama-kun?” Yukinoshita said somewhat thornily, as if she did not think highly of Hayama’s capabilities.

But Hayama seemed not to care particularly since he had turned his attention towards Yuigahama.

“You don’t get it, Yukinon,” Yuigahama said. “There’s only one reason why a girl would change.”

“The reason a girl would change... are you talking about degradation over time?”

“Isn’t that called aging?! Y-you’ve got the wrong idea! A girl will always be a girl at heart! Yukinon, have more pride in yourself as a woman!”

“Not that again...” Yukinoshita sighed in astonishment. Still, she had a point. In my opinion, girls who use the phrase “girl power” have a much lower girl power than the girls they criticise for having no girl power.

“The reason a girl would change i-is... love, or something like that.”

I could hardly believe this chick could blurt out something so embarrassing.

...not to mention she was the one who was most embarrassed out of all of us.

“A-anyway! When you like someone, your whole world changes! I thought we should get someone who could trigger that reaction... so I called Hayato-kun.”

“Er, I don’t know why you thought of me,” Hayama said to Yuigahama with a strained smile.

Oi, you bastard, if you don't even know why she thought of you, I'll get even more pissed off at you. Zaimokuza evidently thought the same way, because he glared at Hayama at approximately the same moment I did.

“I'm sure there are a lot of other guys who get along with girls. Even among us... isn't Totsuka quite popular?”

Oh, good... so Hayama is aware of his own popularity... I mean no, I'll never forgive that asshole. Zaimokuza evidently thought the same way, because he glared at Hayama at approximately the same moment I did.

“M-me? I don't really know about that...” Totsuka looked down, his face reddening.

When she saw how he looked, Yuigahama folded her arms and pondered slightly. “Hmm. I think Sai-chan is cute too, but I don't reckon he's Kawasaki-san's type. The other guy here is, let's face it, Chuuni is a chuuni. That leaves only Hayato-kun.”

“Oi, don't just casually leave me out.”

She turned bright red. “Y-you're out of the question, Hikki!”

Man, she really didn't need to blow up at me...

On another note, Zaimokuza was even more shocked than I was at being completely sideswiped... also, was her nickname for him 'Chuuni'?

"Yuigahama-san's judgment is astute," Yukinoshita said to me. "Do you honestly believe that there is anyone in your class who would notice you?"

"Nope."

I agreed with her. You see, if I were a girl, I wouldn't have the least bit of interest in a loner like me. Look, that's my talent as a ninja, okay. You can't help it when your existence is shrouded in shadows. Man, what a great ninja I am. Believe it...

"Oh, uh, I didn't mean it like that. I mean you're not really *that* bad, it's just, you know, reasons and stuff... anyway, I asked Hayato-kun to help out." As I thought about how I would make use of my shinobi skills to become the Hokage one day, Yuigahama went on talking to Hayama in front of her. "Won't you help us out?"

She clapped her hands together and bowed her head.

There was no guy who would refuse if he was asked like that. A bunch of things happens to boys. They get happy if someone asks them for something and they get a funny feeling in their chest if someone claps their hand together in request and they're motivated by the desire to be a hero by helping others from the time they're small. A bunch of things, I guess.

Hayama appeared to be no different. “I got it,” he answered with a slight shrug. “There’s nothing else for it if that’s the reason. I can’t guarantee anything, but I’ll do what I can.” He paused. “You do your best too, Yui,” he said as he clapped his hand on Yuigahama’s shoulder.

Ugh, wasn’t he the one who’s supposed to do his best?

“Th-thanks...” Yuigahama answered blushing from being touched.

And with that, Yuigahama’s plan “Operation: Gigolo Hayama’s Romcom Exploits!” went underway. What a lame naming sense.

The gist of it was simple.

Hayama would use all of his gigolo powers at once to catch and ensnare Kawasaki’s heart. (By the way, why do they say you ‘catch’ a person’s heart anyway? Not even a gigolo is capable of ripping a heart out of someone’s chest.)

Moving into position at the bicycle parking area, we went on waiting in preparation for Kawasaki to arrive. Of course, since it was unusual for us to be with Hayama, we put some distance between us so that we could observe what was going on between him and her.

Then finally, the time came.

Kawasaki walked into view, listlessly dragging her feet the same way as yesterday. As she stifled a yawn and opened the lock on her bicycle, Hayama chose that moment to appear.

“Hey there. You seem tired,” he remarked lightly.

It was meant to be an act, but he said it with such natural ease that we, who were listening nearby, couldn’t help but utter “Hey there” back at him.

“Do you have a part-time job? You shouldn’t bite off more than you can chew, you know?” he said with such casual concern.

I can’t believe that Hayama, half of me thought, while the other half was in love with him.

Meanwhile, Kawasaki just sighed with irritation. “Thanks for looking out for me. Well, later.” She started pushing her bike out without a care in the world.

But as she turned her back, a warm voice assailed her, one that would thaw even the coldest of hearts.

“Look...”

That made Kawasaki stop in her tracks. She looked back at Hayama over her shoulder from where she stood.

A refreshing early summer breeze blew in the space between those two. At this sudden romcom development, Yuigahama leaned her whole body forward with great interest, gripping her hands so tightly her palms were sweaty. Meanwhile, Zaimokuza seethed with hate and jealousy and gripped his fists with killing intent.

As the cool breeze stopped, Hayama's voice rang out. Hayama had pretty boy sparkles all over him. He was reeking of pheromones.

"You don't have to pretend to be so tough, you know?"

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

"Thanks, but no thanks." Kawasaki went on wheeling her bicycle.

But for Hayama Hayato, time had stopped. He had been left behind. It took a full ten seconds for Hayama to return to where we were watching over in the shadows.

"So it looks like I was rejected," he laughed sheepishly.

“Oh, g’jo- pfffft.” I meant to comfort him, but the words wouldn’t come out of my mouth. An unfamiliar sensation was kicking me in the stomach. *Shit! My sides!* While I fought to stifle the sudden feeling that had come over me, the guy next to me was on a rampage.

“HAHA, BWAHAHAHAHA! You got r-rejected! *Rejected!* Not such hot stuff after all, getting *rejected!* Bwahahaha!”

“Sh-shuddup already, Zaimokuza pfffft...” I snorted loudly.

“It’s mean to laugh, you two!” Totsuka told us off, looking as if he was trying very hard to hold back on his laughter himself. Zaimokuza’s bellowing laughter was infectious and he just couldn’t help himself.

“W-well, you see. I don’t really mind, Totsuka,” Hayama said, grimacing.

...man, was he a nice guy. He’d helped us out despite his misgivings, and because of that he’d suffered a humiliation. And yet he took it like the good sport he was.

Predictably enough, Zaimokuza stifled his laughter as he considered Hayama’s situation, and coughed loudly instead.

“Sir Hayama... you don’t have to pretend to be so tough pfffft! Hahahaha!”

“Idiot! Quit it, Zaimokuza! Stop making me laugh!”

As Zaimokuza and I roared in laughter, Yuigahama’s face stiffened. “You guys are the worst...”

“So this was a failure too,” said Yukinoshita. “It couldn’t be helped. Tonight, we’ll try going to the other store.”

“Guess so...”

I wheezed. This was fun.

It was the first time I’d ever been glad to join the Service Club. Period.

4-9

The time on my wristwatch said it was 8:20 pm. I leaned against the tapered monument (aka “the weird drill thing”) at our meeting place in front of Kaihin-Makuhari Station¹. Opposite of me was the Hotel Royal Okura, where situated on the top floor was the bar called “Angel Ladder”.

It was the final store in Chiba’s central business district with “angel” in its name that operated until the early hours in the morning. The name was written out twice: first with English letters and then in Japanese.

I adjusted my flimsy, uncomfortable jacket so that I could get used to it better. It was a beautiful jacket I’d borrowed without asking from my father’s closet, but it still fit me well since we were around the same height. I wore jeans and a coloured shirt with a black stand-up collar, along with a pair of long nose leather shoes. It wasn’t the sort of stuff I wore every day.

Seriously, I couldn’t stand these clothes. Everything besides the jeans was my dad’s stuff. My hair was even gelled and everything, courtesy of Hikigaya Komachi. When I asked Komachi to pick out some grownup-looking clothes for me, she somehow turned the whole house upside down in her quest to complete my outfit.

¹ A photo of the monument for reference: <http://blog-imgs-43-origin.fc2.com/n/i/s/nishifuna/3S0029.jpg>

(“Since you’ve got the eyes of a tired salaryman, onii-chan, your clothes and hair need to look like a grownup’s as well,” she insisted, which was troubling for me to hear. Were my eyes really that bad?)

The first one to appear at our meeting place was Totsuka Saika. “Sorry, were you waiting?”

“Nah, I just got here,” I said.

Totsuka was dressed in sporty clothes that would have looked good on either sex. His loose-fitting cargo pants were coupled with a somewhat tight-fitting T-shirt. He wore a thin kind of woollen hat that wouldn’t warm anyone up and a pair of headphones hung around his neck. Every time he moved around in his basketball shoes, his wallet chain jingled and gave off a dull sheen.

It was the first time I’d ever seen Totsuka in plain clothes - no wonder I stared at him vacantly. As I did so, Totsuka held on tightly to his woollen hat and hid his eyes in embarrassment for some reason.

“Oh, don’t stare at me so much... d-do I look weird?”

“N-no, not at all! You, uh, look good.”

This whole exchange sounded uncannily like something you might say on a date, but unfortunately, Totsuka and I were not in that kind of relationship.

Zaimokuza proved that just by showing his face.

Okay, so for some reason he was dressed in a monk's day clothes and he had a white towel wrapped around his head. Anyway, I ignored him.

“Hmm. This should be the meeting place... ooooh! If it isn't Hachiman!”

When you're pissed off by an annoying character, you couldn't help but comment on it. “What's with that outfit? Why do you have a towel wrapped around your head? You think you're a ramen chef?”

“Oho, good grief. Were you not the one who said to dress like a mature adult? As such, I *chose* to wear the monk's clothing and towel like a working man...”

...ah, so *that* was the idea. Man, now that he'd gone ahead and worn it there was nothing much I could do about it. He didn't have to go so overboard, but whatever.

At around the same time I came to that conclusion, I heard the sound of Yuigahama stomping into view. She looked around restlessly and took out her cell phone. Did she not realise we were right next to her?

“Yuigahama,” I called out to her, causing her to stiffen in reaction. She looked back over her shoulder with fear written across her face. Seriously, she was *just* looking at us one second ago.

“H-Hikki?! Oh, it’s Hikki. For a moment there, I didn’t recognise you... s-some outfit, huh?”

“Quiet you. Don’t laugh.”

“I-I’m not laughing at all! I was just, like, shocked at how different you are from normal...” She stared at me as she made noises of incredulity. Then she nodded knowingly. “Did Komachi-chan pick those clothes out for you?”

“Yeah, you catch on quick.”

“Just as I thought...” Yuigahama seemed to have grasped something. I had no idea what she had figured out.

She’d gone all fashion police on me for some reason, so I returned the favour and looked her over.

Yuigahama was wearing a tube top with a vinyl bra-strap that covered only her right shoulder and slipped off her left. A heart-shaped necklace hung around her neck like usual, which she probably had a liking for. She wore a denim jacket with short sleeves over her upper body.

Her black chino mini pants had a gold button on them, and she wore high mule shoes that clung to her ankles like vines. Whenever she walked, her anklets wobbled.

“Somehow, you don’t look very grownup to me...”

“Huh?! What part?!” Yuigahama looked at her arms in a panic, and then at her legs. From all of those accessories, she did look like a female college student, I guess...

And with that, we were more or less all together. Just as I was thinking only one more person needed to show up, I heard a voice behind me.

“I apologise. Was I late?”

Her white summer dress stood out brilliantly in the pitch-black darkness of the night. Looking down, I could see the outline of her thin, supple legs through her black leggings. Her small mule shoes were patently simple, fitting her feet like a glove. It looked very flattering. When she lifted her palm to check the time, the pink surface of her miniature wristwatch reflected against her white skin, standing out in its cuteness. I could see that the metal band wrapped around her slender, feminine wrist was made of silver.

“It’s time.”

Yukinoshita Yukino exuded the cool charm of an alpine flower blooming in the night.

“R-right...” I couldn’t muster any more words. I remembered how her appearance had overwhelmed me the first time I encountered her in the Service Club.

Now if only her personality matched up...

“You the Mottainai Ghost?”

“That’s ridiculous. The Mottainai Ghost does not exist²,” Yukinoshita denied me smoothly, gazing at all of us in turn. “Hmph...” She pointed at each of us, starting with Zaimokuza. “That’s inappropriate wear.”

“Huh?”

“That’s inappropriate wear.”

“...eh?”

² The ghost that parents refer to when they want to scare their children into eating their vegetables. “If you waste food, the Mottainai Ghost will gobble you up!” Incidentally, “Mottainai” means “What a waste”.



“That’s inappropriate wear.”

“What?”

“Your entire appearance is inappropriate.”

“Hey...”

For some reason she was judging us all. And for some reason, she judged me differently from the others...

“I told you all to come in formal clothing.”

“I thought you said dress like an adult?”

“Where we are going, nobody will be dressed like that. The men have their ties done up and it’s common sense to wear a jacket.”

“I-is that how it is...?” Totsuka asked.

Yukinoshita nodded in reply. “Plenty of reasonably well-priced hotels and restaurants are like that. You’d do well to remember that.”

“You sound like you know what you’re talking about.” It wasn’t something an ordinary high school student would know about, that’s for sure. About the only restaurants we went to were Bamiyan and Saize. The most high-class restaurant we’d been to was Royal Host at best.

In any case, I was the only one among us wearing a jacket. Totsuka was in casual clothes, while Zaimokuza looked like a ramen chef.

“I-is my outfit no good either?” Yuigahama asked to make sure.

Yukinoshita looked somewhat ill at ease. “In the case of a girl, your dress code isn’t too bad... but if your escort were Hikigaya-kun, you could afford to be a little stricter.” I rustled my Hiromi Go-like jacket to make my presence known, but Yukinoshita snickered³. “Your clothing may make you seem harmless but your rotten eyes tell another story.”

...were my eyes really that potent?

“I would rather not have to go through the effort of trying again after being rejected at the door the first time, so I suppose you might be better off changing clothes at my house, Yuigahama-san.”

“Whoa, you’re letting me in your house?! I wanna go, I wanna go!” Yuigahama caught herself. “Oh, but won’t I cause a bother at this hour?”

³ Hiromi Go is a Japanese entertainer. He is sometimes referred to as the “Japanese Ricky Martin”.

“That’s nothing to worry about. I live by myself, you see.”

“You’re a capable woman?!” Yuigahama blinked in exaggerated surprise.

I had to wonder what was up with her assumptions. Did she think everyone who lives alone is a capable woman? But in Yukinoshita’s case, I had to agree. Her cooking was insanely good and (more to the point) I couldn’t imagine her living with someone else.

“Then let’s get going, shall we? It’s just over there.” Yukinoshita looked up at the sky behind her.

The whole area was filled with high-rise apartments well-known for being particularly expensive. I didn’t really watch television so I didn’t know much, but I did recognise it as the setting in dramas or the occasional ad. (Random trivia: Kaihin-Makuhari is often used as the backdrop in hero shows.)

Yukinoshita was peering at the faint orange light coming from a tremendously tall skyscraper. Interestingly enough, it appeared Yukinoshita lived in a room on one of the top floors. Whoa. Whoa. So this was how the bourgeois lived... somehow, I doubted even those sorts would let a high school girl live alone.

“Totsuka-kun,” she said, “I’m sorry to turn you down after you came all this way...”

“No, it’s fine. It was kind of fun seeing you all out of your uniforms,” Totsuka said with a grin.

His sheer cuteness almost made me want to go home already. I didn’t want to see him go. “Okay, so while Yuigahama’s changing, we’ll have dinner. Contact me appropriately when you’re done.”

“Okay, sure thing!”

Once the two girls separated from us, the three remaining boys fell silent, listening to the rumblings of their stomachs.

“So, what are we gonna eat?” Zaimokuza asked as he rubbed his stomach.

Totsuka and I looked at each other.

“Ramen,” we said in unison.

4-10

I parted ways from Totsuka and Zaimokuza in front of the train station ticket barrier. At the ramen store, Zaimokuza was mistaken for the chef by the other customers, so they kept trying to order food from him. Still, I got to eat some great-tasting ramen and the other two seemed satisfied as well.

As I left the station, I faced the Hotel Royal Okura. This time, I was meeting Yukinoshita and Yuigahama there, just the two of them. When I stood in front of the hotel for the second time, I was slightly overwhelmed by how big it was. Even the faint light shining from the building seemed like something from another world. It was clearly a building a mere high school student wasn't supposed to enter.

Still, I went inside, my heart beating frantically in my chest. Even the ground beneath my feet felt completely different. A rolled-out carpet was spread out before me. What was this, the Academy Awards?

I could see that all the ladies and gents in the lounge were acting in a casually snobbish way. I caught sight of foreigners here and there. This freaked me out; it was way too much like Makuhari City.

According to the text I got from Yuigahama, we were supposed to meet in front of the hotel elevators. Unlike the elevators I was familiar with, the door was flashing with lights. And the opening was wide too. Like, you could stick a sofa in the elevator. It was bigger than my own living room.

Plus, the sofa was nice to sit on as well - really spongy. Oh, and there were also pots and stuff around as well. As soon as I stretched out on the sofa and yawned, my cell phone made a beep.

"We just came, u here yet??"

She said she'd arrived but... I looked around my surroundings uncertainly.

"S-sorry to keep you waiting..." a beautiful, sweet-smelling lady said to me.

A crimson red dress traced a circuitous line around her neckline, making her look like a mermaid. Her hair was tied up into a bun, and as she peeped at me she gulped. "It's totally like I'm here for a piano recital..."

"Oh, it's you, Yuigahama. I thought you were someone else." I finally realised it was Yuigahama because of her teenage girl speak, but I would probably never have caught on if she happened to act composed.

"Can you at least say you're here for a wedding ceremony? As one would expect, I have rather mixed feelings about being told this level of clothing is for a piano recital, however..." said a beautiful girl in a jet black dress who had just appeared.

The fabric of her dress exuded an air of unadulterated radiance, complementing the beauty of her pale skin, as white as virgin snow.

Her flare skirt, which went down to her knees, showed off her shapely legs. And what was even more bewitching was her fine, silky black hair. It was tied up in a single loose ponytail and fell down to her chest, looking like an ornament.

There was no mistaking it whatsoever. It was Yukinoshita Yukino.

“Y-you see, it’s the first time I’ve worn these kinda clothes,” Yuigahama insisted. “Like whoa, who *are* you, Yukinon?!”

“What an exaggeration. I only have them in case the opportunity arises.”

“Most people would never have that opportunity,” I pointed out. “And anyway, where do they sell these things? Shimamura¹?”

“Shimamura? That’s the first time I’ve heard that brand...” she replied blankly.

This chick wouldn’t even be able to tell the difference between Shimamura and Uniqlo.

“Well then, shall we go?” Yukinoshita pressed the elevator button. The light turned on with a ding and the door opened noiselessly.

¹ A cheap clothing chain in Japan.



Through the glass elevator I could see a sweeping view of Tokyo bay. The night-time scenery of Makuhari was dotted with brilliant lights: cruising ships, cars rushing through the bayside city with their tail lights blinking, high-rise buildings.

When we arrived at the top floor, the door opened once again.

A gentle, soothing light lay ahead. A lounge bar was spread out in front of us, obscured in darkness because of the dim candle lighting.

“Hey... hey. Whoa. This is...”

We had clearly stumbled into a place we weren't meant to be. On a stage lit up with spotlights, a white-skinned lady was playing a jazz number on the piano. She was probably an American. Foreigner = American, after all.

Maybe I should go home after all, I thought, making eye contact with Yuigahama. She was nodding eagerly as if she could not say yes enough.

All it took was a peasant like Yuigahama to make me feel supremely at ease in this space. But for Yukinoshita, a member of high society, that was impermissible.

“Stop gawking.” She trod on me firmly with her heels.

“Ouch!” I yelled without thinking. What was up with those high heels? Those things pierced you like hell. They were freaking stingrays or something.

“Stand up straight and push your chest out. Pull your chin in,” Yukinoshita assailed my ears as she surreptitiously grabbed my right elbow. Her fine, slender fingers hooked around it tightly.

“Er, uh... Yukinoshita-san? Something the matter?”

“Don’t lose your head. Yuigahama-san, do the same.”

“Wh-wha?”

With a completely baffled look on her face, Yuigahama did as the adult-like Yukinoshita dictated. To cut a long story short, she attached her hand to my left elbow.

“Then let’s make our way,” Yukinoshita told me.

With that, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and I began walking slowly in step with each other. When we passed through the open, heavy wooden door, we were instantly approached by a male waiter, and I put my head down.

“How many people?” “Do you smoke, sir?” I couldn’t get a word in. As he talked on and on, the man kept half a step ahead of us, guiding us to the bar counter in front of the edge of a glass window.

There, polishing the glasses thoroughly was a female bartender. She stood tall and straight and perfectly composed. Her muted expression and sleep-deprived eyes matched the tone of this dimly lit bar.

...hey, wasn't this Kawasaki?

She gave off a totally different impression than she did at school. Her long hair was tied up in a bun, she was dressed in a waiter outfit and her movements were elegant and refined. Her listlessness was gone.

Without realising who we were, Kawasaki wordlessly placed a coaster and refreshers in front of us, waiting in silence. I thought for sure she would place a menu in front of us and ask for our order, but of course it didn’t turn out like that.

“Kawasaki,” I said to her quietly.

Kawasaki made a slightly worried face. “I’m deeply sorry. Who may you be?”

“I’m impressed. Not even Hikigaya-kun’s own classmates remember his face,” Yukinoshita said admiringly as she sat down on a stool.

“Well, you see. Our clothes are different today, so it’s not his fault,” Yuigahama interjected as she sat down as well.

There was a vacant seat between them. If this were Othello, I’d have lost. *If this were Go...* oh well, not like I even knew the rules of that game.

“We found you, Kawasaki Saki-san,” Yukinoshita declared.

The tone of Kawasaki’s face changed. “Yukinoshita...” Her expression was that of someone encountering a familiar foe. It was quite clearly antagonistic.

While I doubted the two of them had ever interacted with each other, Yukinoshita was a well-known face in our school. I figured there were people who did not think kindly of Yukinoshita from how she appeared and what her personality was like.

“Good evening.” Whether she was aware of Kawasaki’s feelings or not, Yukinoshita uttered the standard night-time greeting coolly.

The two of them exchanged gazes. They were as different as night and day. I got the feeling sparks were crackling. Scary.

Kawasaki’s eyes were narrowed harshly as she poured a drink for Yuigahama. Being with Yukinoshita, someone from her own school, meant that they could only see right through each other’s transparent appearances.

“Yo, sup...?” Yuigahama said lamely, as if succumbing to the pressure.

“Yuigahama... I didn’t know you for a second. So is this guy a Soubu High person too?”

“Uh, yeah,” said Yuigahama. “He’s Hikki from our class. Hikigaya Hachiman.”

When I nodded my head in confirmation, Kawasaki sighed and smiled resignedly. “I see. So you caught me out.”

She shrugged as if she didn’t have anything to hide in particular. Folding her arms, she fell back against the wall. That action indicated that perhaps having her cover blown bothered her more than she let on. She gave off a listless atmosphere, just like she did at school, and after she let out a weary sigh, she glanced at us.

“...you want a drink?”

“I’ll have a Perrier,” Yukinoshita said in response. I had no idea what a Perrier even was.

“I-I’ll have the same thing!” That was what I was planning to say, but Yuigahama jumped the queue.

I groaned, fuming. Seriously, what was I *supposed* to say? Dom Pérignon or Donpen or something? (By the way, Donpen is the mascot character of a dirt cheap club. If you ordered for him, he probably wouldn't come out.)

“Hikigaya, was it? What about you?”

That Perri-whatever from before was a drink as well as a commodore, huh... I wasn't under any particular obligation to say anything like Townsend Harris or Ernest Mason Satow². Still, for now, I'd order a drink with a person's name in it...

“I'll have MAX Co-”

“He'll have dry ginger ale,” Yukinoshita interrupted me mid-sentence.

With a wry smile and a “I understand,” Kawasaki prepared three champagne glasses and poured each drink with consummate ease before placing them on the coasters. Somehow, without any words being said, we ended up putting the glasses to our lips in time with each other.

Then after a pause, Yukinoshita said, as if remember something, “I don't believe they serve MAX Coffee here.”

² These are all references to famous Westerners in the history of Japan. Commodore Perry was partly responsible for opening Japanese ports to the West. Townsend Harris was the first United States Consul General to Japan. Ernest Mason Satow was a key diplomatic figure in the 1800s.

“Seriously?! But this is Chiba.”

A Chiba without MAX Coffee isn't Chiba anymore, okay? There was MAX Coffee even in the mountains, just like in the Yamanashi prefecture.

“...well, we *do* serve it,” Kawasaki muttered idly, causing Yukinoshita to look up at her sharply. So, um, why did these two not get along anyway? Scary. “So what did you come here for? Don't tell me you're on a date with that thing?”

“Goodness no. If you're talking about this thing next to me, your humour was in poor taste.”

“Um... this is an argument between you two, so could you kindly stop randomly throwing insults my way?” I was really not impressed by being referred to as a thing. The conversation between the two of them seemed to be going nowhere, so I decided to cut to the chase. “I heard you've been coming home late these days. Is it because of this part-time job of yours? Your little bro's worried about you.”

At that, Kawasaki smiled with a faint look of ridicule on her face, except it was hindered by her annoyance. “You came all the way here just to say that? Good job. You know, do you seriously think I'd stop just because some guy I don't know or care about said that to me?”

“Amazing. Even Hikki's classmates don't know or care about him...” Yuigahama picked a strange moment to show her admiration.

Still, I didn't know anything about Kawasaki either, so we were even.

Kawasaki suddenly spoke up again. "Ooooh, so the reason I was thinking things had gotten a little more irritating lately was because of you guys. Taishi said something to you? I don't know how he tried to spin it, but I'll have a word with him, so don't worry." She paused. "You see, Taishi's got nothing to do with this."

Kawasaki glared openly at me. She pretty much said keep your nose out of my business. But Yukinoshita was not the sort of person to back down after meeting adversity.

"There *is* a reason for you to stop." Yukinoshita shifted her gaze from Kawasaki to the wristwatch on her left hand, checking the time. "10:40... if you were Cinderella, you'd have one hour left before your magic runs out."

"If my magic were to run out, only a happy ending awaits me, don't you think?"

"I wonder about that, My Little Mermaid. I believe a bad end lies ahead of you."

The nature of their exchange discouraged anyone from intervening, as if matching the overall atmosphere in the bar.

Repeating sarcastic and snide remarks was a hobby of the elite. But seriously, why did they not get along? Wasn't this the first time they had ever spoken to each other? Scary.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder insistently and talked against my ear, distracting me from my thoughts.

“...hey, Hikki. What are those two talking about?”

Oh, Yuigahama. I can really feel at ease with a peasant like you around...

The Labour Standards Act forbids minors to work past ten o'clock at night. By working even at this hour, Kawasaki was making use of the magic known as an illegal ID. And that magic would run out if Yukinoshita had any say about it.

Yet Kawasaki was as unperturbed as ever.

“So you have no inclination to quit?” Yukinoshita pressed her.

“Hm? Nope,” Kawasaki said nonchalantly as she wiped a sake bottle with a cloth. Then she paused. “Well, even if I did decide to quit here, I could always get a job somewhere else.”

Yukinoshita stirred her Perry (...or was it a Harris?) agitatedly, as if she were slightly peeved by Kawasaki's attitude.

In this unsettling, hostile atmosphere, Yuigahama opened her mouth nervously.

“Um, you know... Kawasaki-san, why do you have to work *here*? I mean, like, I take a part-time job too when I don’t have any money, but it’s not like I lie about my age and work at night...”

“No reason... I just need the money.” The sake bottle on the table made a small scraping sound as she placed it on the table.

Well, I guess that’s how it goes, I thought. Money was almost always the main reason to work. There were people who did it because everyone else was doing it or because they couldn’t live without it, but I never understood those types.

“Oh, yeah, I get what you mean,” I began nonchalantly.

Kawasaki’s expression hardened instantly. “No, you *don’t* get it... no one who would write down such a dumbass career option would get it.”

Kawasaki and I had met sometime on the roof. She had seen the answers I wrote on the Prospective Workplace Tour Survey Form. Does that ring a bell?

“It wasn’t *that* dumbass...”

“Huh, if that wasn’t dumbass, I don’t know what is. You seriously underestimate the human race.” Kawasaki slammed the cloth she had been wiping the sake bottle with against the counter with a thud, causing the ceiling to shake. “You... no, not just you - Yukinoshita and Yuigahama don’t get it either.”

It's not like I'm working 'cos I want money to play around with. Don't put me in the same group as that moron over there."

Kawasaki glared at me with steel in her eyes. *Don't get in my way*, those eyes seemed to roar vehemently. But she was crying on the inside.

And yet, that really was a sign of her strength when all was said and done. I was not made to think that her heated words were a sigh of defeat, signifying how oh so misunderstood she was and that she secretly wanted people to like her.

Take Yukinoshita, for instance. She was misunderstood by everyone, and she did not give up or cry. But that was because she was convinced of the force of her own will.

Or take Yuigahama. When she was trying to understand someone, she didn't give up or run away. No matter how things appeared to her on the surface, she'd go on trying to make contact with the other person, praying something would change.

"Yeah, but nothing'll change if you don't talk to us, y'know? It might even, like, make you stronger... just talking can lift your spirits, so yeah..." Yuigahama trailed off mid-sentence. Kawasaki's frosty glare silenced her before she could say another word.

“Like I said, you guys definitely don’t get it. Make me stronger? Lift my spirits? Okay, then. You can cough up money for me. Can you guys shoulder the burden my parents are incapable of?”

Jesus! Kawasaki scared the hell out of me. Her words made Yuigahama hang her head in shame. “Th-that’s...” she uttered with difficulty.

“That’s quite enough,” Yukinoshita said in a frigid tone. “If you mouth off any more...” She was all the more imposing for cutting off Yuigahama mid-sentence. I was scared out of my skin.

Like me, Kawasaki winced for a moment, but she turned back to Yukinoshita with small *tsk*. “Hey, isn’t your dad a member of the prefectural diet? There’s no way some well-off snob like you can understand me...” she said in a quiet, whispering tone. There was a note of defeatism in her voice.

As soon as Kawasaki uttered those words, there was a sharp clatter as a glass fell down.

When I looked to the side, a puddle of Perrier was spreading from where the champagne glass had fallen over sideways.

Yukinoshita was biting her lip, her gaze pointed downwards. I would never have imagined Yukinoshita looking like that. Unable to muster any thoughts, I peered down at Yukinoshita in shock.

“...Yukinoshita?”

She gave a start. “Huh? O-oh, I apologise,” Yukinoshita said with her usual - no, with an even more frigid lack of expression than usual as she calmly wiped the table with a moistened hand towel.

I guessed that for Yukinoshita, that unusual reaction was an instant taboo. Come to think of it, it wasn’t the first time I’d seen her make that expression. Just as I was about to remember where I’d seen it before, I heard the sound of someone slamming the table.

“Hold on! Yukinon’s family has nothing to do with this!” Yuigahama spoke unusually roughly as she glared at Kawasaki. It was no joke or attempt at getting along - Yuigahama was pissed. So she could make such an ugly face too when she was mad...

Whether it was because the contrast from Yuigahama’s usual frivolous laughter took her aback or because she was aware herself that she had uttered something offensive, Kawasaki lowered her tone somewhat.

“...then my family has nothing to do with it either.”

And that was the end of that.

Yuigahama and I - and, of course, Yukinoshita - had nothing to do with her. If, say, Kawasaki's actions were to temporarily break the law, her parents and teachers would be the ones to take fault in that and she would ultimately be judged by the law. There was not a single thing we - who were not her friends or anything to her at all - could do for her.

“You might have a point but that's not the issue here! Yukinon is-”

“Yuigahama-san. Please calm yourself. I merely tipped my glass over. It is nothing to concern yourself with, so don't worry.” Yukinoshita gently restrained Yuigahama, whose whole body was leaning past the counter. She kept her voice cooler than normal and it sounded very frigid indeed.

Even though it was early summer, the atmosphere was quite cold and stifling. That was how things seemed to go today. Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and also Kawasaki spoke calmly and it led to this.

There were just a few things I understood. All that was left was to do something to fix the current situation.

“Let's just go home already. Honestly, I can't keep my eyes open here. Soon as I finish drinking this I'm going home.”

Come to think of it, Cinderella still had more than half her time left.

“You...” Yukinoshita sighed in disgust and was about to say something to me when Yuigahama stopped her.

“Now now. Yukinon, shall we go home now?”

When Yuigahama and I exchanged glances, Yuigahama gave a light nod. It seemed Yuigahama had realised that Yukinoshita was acting differently from her normal self.

“...very well, then let us be off.”

Miraculously enough, Yukinoshita followed my lead, as if she realised herself that she was acting strangely. As she quietly placed a number of cash notes on the table without even checking the bill, she stood up. Yuigahama stood up from her chair, following Yukinoshita in suit.

I called out to her back. “Yuigahama, I’ll text you later.”

“...huh? Oh, uh. Right, um, okay.” Because of the direct lighting, I could see that Yuigahama’s face was bright red and that her hands were fidgeting in front of her chest. It was an action too awkward for this trendy place, so I wished she’d stop it. “I’ll wait for it, then.”

After I saw the two of them off, I tilted my glass and turned back to Kawasaki. Once I quenched a bit of my thirst, I began to speak.

“Kawasaki. Give me some of your time tomorrow morning. I’ll be at McDonalds at half past five. Got it?”

“Huh? Why?” Kawasaki’s attitude was even colder than before.

Still, I had confidence my next words would change her perspective. “I want to talk to you a little about Taishi.”

“...what?” Kawasaki peered at me with suspicious - no, more like hostile eyes. In order to avoid those eyes, I chugged down the remains of my champagne glass with one swallow and stood up.

“We’ll talk about that tomorrow. Later.”

“Hold on!” she shouted at me.

Ignoring her, I made to swagger out of the place coolly in a way that fit the store’s trendy vibe.

“Hold on! That’s not enough money!”

...damn it, Yukinoshita. She hadn’t paid for my share. Wordlessly, I returned to the counter and offered a meagre one thousand yen as a courtesy.

When I did, I received sixty yen in return. I got the feeling that I wasn't supposed to ask her why at this point.

A single serving of ginger ale cost almost a thousand yen. This was daylight robbery...

4-11

Fast forward to the next morning. Or so I write, except instead of sleeping I was down at McDonald's at 5:00 am, nodding off and sipping on my second serving of coffee. The sky was already lit and the sparrows were busily pecking at the ground before returning to flight once again.

After that Hotel Royal Okura incident, we each went our separate ways. Once I got home, I begged Komachi to do something for me and went outside to kill some time. I was probably better off sleeping, but I didn't have confidence I'd wake up at five.

That was one reason I'd stayed awake in that fashion.

“So you came...”

The automated door made a sound as it opened, and Kawasaki Saki appeared, scraping her feet listlessly. “What do you want?” she asked much more irately than usual, possibly because she hadn't gotten much sleep.

She was so pissed off the thought of lying prostrate on the ground in front of her crossed my mind for a brief moment, but I dispelled the thought and acted as casually as I could.

“Well, comb down.” I fumbled over my words with exceptional finesse. “I mean, calm down.”

Okay, so acting casual was a huge failure. But that was because Kawasaki scared the hell out of me.

That small mistake was all it took for me to loosen up, and from then on my words came out smoothly. “Everyone’ll be here soon. So just wait a little longer.”

“Everyone?”

As a puzzled Kawasaki looked on at me the automated door made a sound as it opened once again, signalling the arrival of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

Just after I’d parted ways from those two, I sent Yuigahama a brief text. I instructed her to stay the night at Yukinoshita’s place, contact her parents and come to the McDonalds with Yukinoshita at five in the morning. That was all - I wrote those three points to communicate a simple, pragmatic message.

“You guys again?” Kawasaki sighed deeply in exasperation.

But she wasn’t the only irate individual here.

With a sulky look on her face, Yuigahama refused to look my way.

“What, didn’t she get enough sleep?” I tried asking Yukinoshita, but she shrugged as well.

“Who knows? I thought she had a good sleep... that reminds me, after she got your text message I felt that her mood took a conspicuous turn for the worse. Did you write something lewd in there?”

“Could you, like, stop treating me like a sex criminal? And anyway, I don’t know how a text with simple instructions would make her so mad.”

As Yukinoshita and I looked at each other, Komachi suddenly butted in. “Yep, that’s my onii-chan for you! He has no basic sense of delicacy.”

“Oi, Komachi. Can you stop appearing out of nowhere just to abuse me?”

“Onii-chan, normally people send instructions in their texts when they’re in a working relationship. When you just put instructions in your texts, it really puts a damper on the conversation.”

“You were called here too, imouto-san?” Yukinoshita asked, somewhat taken aback.

“Yep, I had an errand to run. I brought him here, y’know?” Komachi said, pointing at Taishi. He grunted in response.

“Taishi... what are you doing here at this hour?” Kawasaki glared at Taishi with a mixture of surprise and anger colouring her face.

But Taishi remained unperturbed. “I’m the one who should be asking you that, nee-chan. What have you been doing up to this hour in the morning?”

“It’s none of your business...” Kawasaki severed the conversation right then and there.

But while her logic might work on others, it had no effect on Taishi, who was part of her family. Up until now, Kawasaki and Taishi had been talking one-to-one, and it was because of that Kawasaki had countless avenues of escape. She could arbitrarily cut the conversation short and leave. She could do whatever she wanted.

But now, she couldn’t do that. We encircled her, preventing her from running - and more than that, it was morning, so we could pin her down at an actual spot outside her work.

“It *is* my business,” Taishi insisted. “I’m your family...”

“...I told you that you don’t need to know,” Kawasaki answered, her voice weakening. But even so, her will not to speak remained.

The reason she was turning her back was because she didn't think she could talk to Taishi about it, I surmised.

“Kawasaki, let me guess why you're working and why you need money,” I said, prompting Kawasaki to glare at me. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama turned to me with keen interest.

The reason Kawasaki started a part-time job: clearly, only she would know. But if you thought about it, that was a hint in itself.

Kawasaki Saki became a delinquent in her second year of high school, according to Kawasaki Taishi. It would certainly seem that way from Kawasaki Taishi's point of view. But you could not say the same from Kawasaki Saki's perspective.

From Kawasaki Saki's point of view, she started her part-time job when Kawasaki Taishi entered his third year of middle school. In that case, her reason fell in that time frame.

“Taishi, did something change when you entered your third year?”

“Er, uh... wasn't that around when I started attending cram school?” Taishi wracked his head for various other memories, but that was revealing enough. As if she had guessed what I was about to say next, Kawasaki bit her lip in frustration.

“I get it, it was to pay for her little bro’s tuition fees-” Yuigahama chimed in, but I interrupted her.

“No. The tuition fees themselves were already settled by the time Taishi started going to cram school in April. The enrolment and teaching material fees are already paid by that time. That means the Kawasaki family took those expenses into consideration beforehand. On the other hand, you could say it was a situation where only Taishi’s tuition fees were settled.”

“I see what you’re getting at.” Yukinoshita turned her gaze at Kawasaki with complete comprehension and just a small amount of sympathy. “Indeed, it’s not just the little brother whose tuition fees must be accounted for.”

Right, our school Soubu High was dedicated to preparing students for university. The majority of students hoped to advance to university and many of them actually did so. As a result, quite a few people became fixated on their entrance exams at around their second year of high school, and there were also people who thought seriously about taking a summer course.

And when you’re trying to get into university, you need money every step of the way.

“It’s like what Taishi said. His nee-chan used to be straight-laced and kind. Basically, she’s still that way,” I stated in conclusion.

Kawasaki’s shoulders sagged listlessly.

“Nee-chan... I’m going to cram school, so...”

“...that’s why I said you didn’t need to know.” Kawasaki knocked her brother on the head comfortingly.

Aww, this looked like a heart-warming resolution to all the drama. I mean good for them. And they all lived happily ever after. Or so I thought, but then Kawasaki pursed her lips tightly.

“Still, I can’t quit my job over all this. I intend to go to university. I don’t want to cause you or our parents any trouble over that, Taishi.” Kawasaki’s tone was sharp.

She was clearly keeping her decision to herself, and her iron-clad will once again drove Taishi into silence.

“Um, can I just say something?” A carefree voice broke the silence.

It was Komachi. Kawasaki turned to her exasperatedly. “What?” she demanded half-curtly, half-belligerently.

But Komachi deflected her anger with a grin. “‘kay, so. Both our parents have been working for ages, and so, like, when I was little I’d go home and no one’d be there. Whenever I announced I was back no one ever greeted me.”

“Um, if someone *did* greet you when no one was home it’d be creepy,” I pointed out. “What’s with the sudden spiel?”

“Oh, right. Onii-chan, shut your piehole for a bit.”

She utterly shut me down. Shrugging with acceptance, I held my tongue and turned my ear to what Komachi was saying.

“So then, I got so sick of coming home to a house like that I ran away from home for five days. That time it wasn’t my parents who came to pick me up, it was onii-chan. So from then on, my bro’s been coming home earlier than me. So I’m grateful to my brother for that.”

The best brother in the world - yep, that’s me all right. That heart-warming story (which I had no recollection of) was enough to bring tears to my eyes in spite of myself. In those days, I had no intention of taking care of Komachi whatsoever; I only came home early because I had no friends to play with and I wanted to see the 6:00 anime on TV Tokyo.

Kawasaki turned to me with something very much like newfound respect in her eyes, while Yuigahama’s eyes were a little watery. Yukinoshita was the only one to merely cock her head slightly.

“The reason Hikigaya-kun came home early was because he never had any friends from that time, I believe?”

“Hey, how come you know that? What, are you Yikipedia or something?”

“Well, yeah, I’m well aware of that,” Komachi admitted nonchalantly, “but I thought saying it like this would make my Komachi points go up.”

That prompted Yuigahama to speak up. “You really are Hikki’s sister,” she said wearily.

“Hey, what are you implying...?” Was she saying I was cute too? Then I would agree.

“So what are you even getting at?” Kawasaki demanded irritably.

Honestly, I was practically wetting my pants myself, but Komachi looked Kawasaki straight in the eyes with her usual cheerful smile, completely undeterred. “Even though my brother is so hopeless, he definitely wouldn’t do anything to worry me - that’s what I’m getting at. Even the little things he does help me out and it makes me feel happy.” She grinned. “Oh, that just made my Komachi points go up.”

“Don’t just tack something unnecessary on at the end.”

“No way, it’s obvious you’re just hiding from me in embarrassment. Oh, that also just made my Komachi points go up.”

“Enough already.”

Geez, since I was related to someone who said such dumb, careless things, it was no wonder I couldn't believe a word uttered by those creatures known as women. When I regarded her like the nuisance she was, Komachi pouted and moaned in complaint. When I refused to give in to her, she gave up and resumed conversation with Kawasaki.

“So basically, just like how you don't want to be a nuisance to your family, Saki-san, Taishi-kun doesn't want to cause trouble to you either, y'know? I'd be happy as a younger sibling if you could understand that little point.”

No answer.

Kawasaki was engulfed in silence. And at that moment, so was I.

...crap, I had no idea what to make of these feelings I had. I could hardly believe Komachi thought that way about me. I hadn't realised since she'd never been a troublemaker all along.

“...well, something like that, I guess,” Taishi added lamely. He turned away, his face red.

Kawasaki stood up and stroked Taishi's head gently. Rather than her usual languid expression, she smiled ever so gently.

Even so, the problem had not yet been settled. The only thing that had happened was that Kawasaki and Taishi had learned to communicate again. Being emotionally satisfied did not mean everything is fine and dandy. It wouldn't somehow break down tangible problems or render those problems meaningless. In the end, physical possessions and money were absolutely indispensable.

Money was a quite a severe problem for a high school student. The money you earn at some half-assed part-time job was nothing compared to the scale of the real world. It was depressing to calculate the number of hours you'd have to work to obtain the millions of yen it costs to cover the tuition fees of a private university.

Handing over one or two million yen would make us look great and all, but we didn't have that kind of money and it was against the very principles of the Service Club anyway. It was like Yukinoshita had said that one time. Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

With that in mind, I bestowed upon her one tactic from my get-rich-quick scheme.

“Kawasaki. You know what a scholarship is?”

4-12

At 5:30 in the morning, the air was still unpleasantly chilly. Stifling a yawn, I watched the outlines of two people recede into the distance.

The distance between them never widened or closed; whenever one of them overtook the other, the person ahead would slacken their step for the other to catch up, and their shoulders shook from time to time from the sounds of their boisterous laughter.

Yukinoshita stood in the thick of the morning mist. “Is that what it means to be siblings, I wonder...?” A sigh slipped out of her.

“Could be. Depends a lot on who’s involved. You could also say they’re your closest strangers.”

Actually, there were times when I got so pissed off I’d think about punching my little sister, and at those times I could feel I was not acting like myself at all. And yet, in those inadvertent moments, feelings like love and affection would well up in me too. Being unable to express those feelings clearly and forever sensing a wall between you is what it means to be siblings.

That’s why calling them your closest stranger is as strange as it is fitting. They were the closest person to you and yet they were a stranger, and they were a stranger and yet they were the closest person to you.

“Your closest stranger... I see. I understand that all too well.” Yukinoshita nodded, keeping her face down.

“Yukinon?” Yuigahama peered tentatively at Yukinoshita’s face, puzzled by her appearance.

At that, Yukinoshita whipped her head up and flashed Yuigahama a smile. “Now then, we should get going too. It’ll be time for school in three hours.”

“Oh, okay...” Yuigahama was less than accepting of Yukinoshita’s attitude from the looks of it, but she nodded and adjusted the bag on her shoulder anyway.

I unfastened my bicycle key at that moment too. “Yeah. Komachi, wake up.”

Komachi was sitting on the curb stone in front of the McDonalds and nodding off. I poked her cheek lightly, causing her to mumble something incomprehensible and open her eyes drowsily. She stood up and dragged her feet like a zombie, plopping herself behind my bicycle.

On a normal day, she’d still be asleep. There was nothing for it. Today I’d have to tread slowly on an even road. I sat on my bike and put my feet on the pedals.

“I’m going home now, then. Good work, everyone.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow. No, wait. See you today at school.” Yuigahama did a little wave, her hand close to her chest.

Yukinoshita was silent for a moment, gazing vacantly at Komachi and me, but as soon as I moved my feet, she spoke up quietly. “I don’t recommend you ride with two people at once... you might get into another accident.”

“Oh, see you later,” I replied as I started to pedal. My sleep-deprived brain was unable to work properly, and almost all of my mental capacity was occupied on the road and avoiding the incoming cars. Thanks to that, I could only muster a perfunctory reply to what Yukinoshita said.

Vaguely, I wondered how she knew about that accident...

I pedalled slowly and deliberately in the straight line that intersected with the 14th national highway. The wind that usually blew in our faces whenever we went to school was behind us today. As we waited in front of our second traffic light, a pleasant aroma from the bakery down the road wafted in the air.

My stomach growled in hunger.

“...Komachi. You want some bread before we go home?”

“Tch! Onii-chan, you moron! You always drop by the bakery all quiet and nonchalant and pretending not to notice anything. But you’re just hungry!”

As she poked me in the back, I turned my bike towards the bakery and started pedalling.

Komachi sighed. “Onii-chan, you really are hopeless. If you were gonna pull this stunt, I wouldn’t have said all those nice things about you before.”

“Nah, you weren’t complimenting me at all. In the end, it was all about you being a good kid. And you pretty much made up that story anyway.”

“Well, kinda, yeah,” Komachi said as she stopped punching me. She was quiet for a moment. “But you know, I wasn’t lying about being grateful.”

Then she wrapped her arms around my waist in a tight embrace, burying her head against my back.

“Are your Komachi points going up again?”

“Hmph, you found me out.” Even as she said that, Komachi wouldn’t take her arms away from my waist.

The pleasant early morning breeze had been slowly freezing up our bodies when we were apart. I sensed that the warm, comforting touch of her skin was gradually making me sleepier. Somehow, I suspected we’d be late today as well. If I went home feeling like this, I knew for sure I’d curl up and fall asleep. It wasn’t so bad to be late once in a while, getting along with your sibling like this.

“But you know, good for you.” Komachi’s voice drifted to me from behind. “You got to meet her properly.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

I supposed I was wearing a doubtful expression. Komachi went on talking blithely, unaware of the emotion showing on my face.

“You know, the candy person. I should’ve said something when we all met up before. But oh well, congrats, onii-chan. You got to meet a cute girl like Yui-san ‘cos you fractured a bone.”

“Yeah, I guess...” I pushed my feet and pedalled mechanically. I was unaware of almost all the feeling that comes with performing that action.

This probably explained why my pedalling broke down within moments.

My body suddenly shook violently. And a sharp piercing pain assailed my shin.
“Gahhhh!”

“Ouuuch... what’s up with you all of a sudden? That’s the first time I’ve seen someone miss the pedals.”

Komachi’s incessant whining sounded like something far away.

I could hardly believe what she had just said. So Yuigahama was the candy person?

To anyone else, a candy person might be someone who gives you sweets during the Bon Festival or they might be a friendly relative, but they weren't love interests. But in my case, my fate was connected to that candy person.

I got into a traffic accident in my first day of high school. On the way to school, a girl walking her dog in the school's vicinity let go of her leash at the same unfortunate moment an expensive-looking limousine appeared. My reward for saving that dog was a fractured bone. I was hospitalised for three whole weeks after my first day of school, sealing my fate as a loner.

And the owner of that dog was the girl Komachi referred to as the candy person.

"Onii-chan, what's wrong?" Komachi peered at me with concern, but all I could muster was a vague smile. I'd just been thinking about a few things, that's all.

Then my lips formed a bitter smile, one of self-defeat and mockery.

"It's nothing. Let's just buy that bread and go home," I said as I started pedalling, trying to jerk myself back into motion.

But strangely enough, it was nothing but a futile effort. Once again, the pedal slapped against my shin.

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.



hachiman's mobile

FROM Hachiman
TITLE Re 21:12
 ...sorry, who are you?

FROM Hachiman
TITLE Re 21:20
 (´-`) .o.o (she's totally
 different over email...)



hiratsuka's mobile

FROM Hiratsuka Shizuka
TITLE Hikigaya-kun, how is your exam
 preparation going? 21:09

Modern Japanese will not just be on your
 midterms, it will appear on all your exams
 to come. I advise you work on your
 reading comprehension skills.

FROM Hiratsuka Shizuka 21:15
TITLE Apologies, this is Hiratsuka Shizuka
 Perhaps it would have been easier for you to
 understand if I referred to myself as your teacher.

Chapter 5: Hikigaya Hachiman Goes Back to the Path He Originally Followed

I was swamped in exams every day for a whole week until Monday. Today was the day all the exam results would be returned.

In our classes, we got our answer sheets back and the problems were explained to us. Whenever each subject ended, Yuigahama went out of her way to report to me.

“Hikki! My Japanese history score went up! That study meeting was a good call after all,” Yuigahama yabbered on excitedly, but I gave her the same cold reply every time.

“Good for you.”

“Yep! And it’s all thanks to Yukinon... oh, and you too, Hikki.”

So Yuigahama said, but I did nothing at all.

If you studied more your results were guaranteed to go up. Period. Her praise was fundamentally hollow. I mean, Yuigahama had gotten those scores out of her own hard work.

Speaking of my exam results, I'd been defending my number three ranking in Japanese as usual. My score in maths was a 9/100. Whoa, what's a difference equation again? I'd just made a guess of the meaning from the name of the word, but it was too much of a middle schooler's way of going about things.

Oh, and not only was it the day we got the exam results back, it was the day of the event that had been looming over us for quite some time: the workplace tour. The students were called during recess and sent out to the workplace of their own choosing.

We went to Kaihin-Makuhari Station. This area was quite densely packed with offices, and there were a surprising number of head offices operating there too. And as if at the same time it was aware of what had taken place the other day, it was a hive of activity. Makuhari was not called the new heart of the city for nothing. You could even say it was the capital of Chiba nowadays.

Our group consisted of Totsuka, Hayama and me.

Or at least, that was how it should have been.

But in reality, people were gathering around Hayama like flies every time I looked his way. What was he, a dead body? Well, I never entertained the thought I'd be going with Hayama to begin with. I thought it would be pretty much a date with Totsuka - just the two of us - but when I looked around for Totsuka, he was being followed around by a flock of girls. Totsuka went around looking so shocked and dismayed you'd think he was being bullied if you didn't know him well.

Hayama was surrounded by the three guys who were supposed to be in a different group altogether along with Miura and the others. I could spot Yuigahama's figure among them. When I tried counting here and there, it seemed around five groups had turned up here.

Being with people is really not my forte. On those occasional holidays when I went out, just the sheer number of people around would make me want to crawl back home. Naturally, I ended up trailing well behind the rest of the group. How awesome was I, taking on the position of a lord on my own initiative? If I were a commander in the warring states era, I'd have deserved a medal.

The place our group (and by that I mean just Hayama) chose was an electronic tool maker whose name I'd heard of. Not only did this place function as a simple company office building and a research institution, it was also linked to a museum operating in the vicinity. It was an enterprise that perfectly incorporated interactive fun, what with the screen theatre that took up every square inch of the museum and so on.

If Hayama had picked this place without even being aware of how good it was, then that was a good thing about him: he had an excellent sixth sense. Once again, even if he *had* picked it knowing a huge crowd would gather around here, his level of attention towards the needs of other people was frankly astonishing.

More than any other exhibition, the work of a machine maker was fun to look at, even for a loner like me.

I pressed my face against the glass, staring with rapt attention at the whirring machines like a boy who wanted a new toy. Just looking at the machines was enough to get me pumped.

“We are not machines” were the words people spout when they rebelled against being controlled or used for hard labour, but it was completely spot on. We are not machines. And because of that, there were times when people fumbled the gears they didn’t understand how to use. If it were a mini four-wheeler, I’d be enquiring at Tamiya Corporation¹.

Strictly speaking, machines had such superfluous elements too. Ordinarily, those parts were “for fun”. That was how you explained the purpose of the excess parts of the bike chain and the extra gears. Some might say that a mechanical body that takes it easy will have a longer service life. That was what one of the employees said today - that machines and humans both needed their fun.

Well, not like anyone would ever invite me to have fun...

As I built up a moderate distance between myself and the group, I looked around at the cluster of machines. In front of me were the boys and girls who yabbered on and enjoyed each other’s company. I looked behind me but there was no one. The only thing that greeted me was a painful, deafening silence.

But that utter stillness was soon broken by the clicking sound of hard heels against the floor.

“Hikigaya. So you’re all the way here, huh?”

For once, Hiratsuka-sensei was not wearing her white coat. That was because if she wore her white coat here, she’d be mistaken for one of the employees.

¹ A Japanese manufacturer of plastic model kits and cars.

“Are you looking around, sensei?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Hiratsuka-sensei responded, although her gaze never strayed from the dazzling machinery, not even to spare a glance at her students. “Heh... Japanese machinery is amazing.” She paused. “I wonder if they’ll ever make a Gundam while I’m still alive.”

She really did have the brain of a little boy. She was admiring those steel bodies with sparkling eyes. No, please, stay that way.

The thought occurred to me that this would be an excellent time to make a break for it. Hiratsuka-sensei must have noticed the sound of my footsteps when I began walking, because she matched her pace with mine.

“Oh, that reminds me, Hikigaya. About your hypothetical contest...”

The contest... that referred to the one between Yukinoshita and I, where we were to decide whose method of helping people worked better through the Service Club. The winner would decide the loser’s fate.

Sensei hesitated over the subject she had brought up herself.

I urged her to continue with my eyes alone.

At that, sensei opened her mouth once again, this time with renewed resolve. "There was too much interference from outside factors. The current framework is unable to cope with that. In lieu of that, I propose we alter one part of the system."

Her language was peppered with the same kinds of excuses a game company would use, but to cut a long story short, it seemed sensei's capacity was overloaded, causing her to crash.

"I don't really care either way..." I muttered.

No matter what I did, the rules of this contest were written by Hiratsuka-sensei. She'd change the rules on a whim regardless of what I said. The conditions for winning and losing were decided according to Hiratsuka-sensei's biased judgment in the first place.

Resistance was futile.

"In reality, it's already decided, isn't it?"

"No..." Hiratsuka-sensei said as she scratched her head. "There's still one person who's hard to handle."

Hard to handle. When I heard that, Yuigahama was the first one to spring to mind. She was the one girl who had joined our club after it had started - the club meant only for Yukinoshita and I.

You could call her an irregular existence. An outside factor was fitting too. Without being part of the original plan, she had snuck her way into the heart of the current Service Club.

In that case, perhaps it was a contest among the three of us: me, Yukinoshita - and now Yuigahama.

“Hmph, it appears this is the end of the line for the Mecha Mecha Road.” (*What the hell is a Mecha Mecha Road?*) “If you decide to make a new Service Club, be sure to let me know. Come now, I won’t do anything evil,” Hiratsuka-sensei said with a grin, but it all sounded like a villain’s stock lines to me...

After that, Hiratsuka-sensei went back to the original Mecha Mecha Road. I saw her go and then I turned to the exit.

I’d spent too long chatting with Hiratsuka-sensei. Hayama and the others were already gone, and the loudest sound I could hear was the rustling of the early summer wind in a deserted bamboo thicket. I tried looking around the secluded entrance when the sun began to set and the sky’s colours started to change.

And there, I caught sight of a familiar dumpling ball hairstyle. Inadvertently, I had found her.

5-2

The girl was sitting on the curb stone, hugging her knees and pressing away at her cell phone. For a moment, I deliberated about calling out to her. But in my hesitation, she ended up noticing me instead.

“Oh, Hikki, you’re late! Everyone’s gone already, y’know?”

“Oh, yeah. My bad, I was distracted by my inner robot... so, just where *did* everyone go?”

“Saize.”

High school students in Chiba really love Saize. It was Chiba’s landmark family restaurant since the beginning of time - man, was it overrated. The food was cheap and tasty so it was no surprise, though.

“Aren’t you going?” I asked her abruptly.

“Huh?!” Yuigahama blinked. “Oh, y’see, I was kinda waiting for you, Hikki. Like... I’d feel bad if you were left behind, y’know.”

As she played with her fingers, Yuigahama peered at me hesitantly. Seeing her like that, I broke out into a smile without thinking about it.

“Yuigahama, you’re so nice.”

“Huh?! Um, what?! Th-that’s not true at all!” Yuigahama waved her arms wildly, her face bright red, perhaps because of the setting sun.

I had no idea why she denied it, but I knew Yuigahama was a nice girl. She was a good person, I thought. That was why I had to tell her straight out.

“You know, you really don’t have to worry about me. I saved your dog by coincidence, and plus I’d probably be a loner in high school even if that accident never happened. There’s no need to worry yourself sick over it. That’s what I’ve always said myself.”

I had never actually uttered those words, but I knew myself well enough to know they were true. I would probably - no, *definitely* - not have been surrounded by friends if I had entered high school normally.

“Y-you remembered, Hikki?” Yuigahama gazed at me in open shock, her eyes wide.

“No, I don’t remember it, actually. It’s just that there was this one time you came over to my house to thank me. Komachi told me about it.”

“Oh, right... Komachi-chan told you...” Yuigahama laughed feebly, a hollow smile on her face. She lowered her head furtively.

“Sorry, looks like you went out of your way for me. Well, you don’t have to worry about me from now on. I was a loner from the beginning and that accident had nothing to do with it. You don’t have to feel sorry for me or act out of obligation.” I paused, and then I went on. “If you’re nice to me out of concern for my *feelings*, then stop it.”

For a moment there, I was keenly aware of how roughly I spoke. I practically snarled those words at her. I wondered why I did that. It wasn’t something to get so riled up over.

I scratched my head as a way of hiding my irritation. That was the desperate sound of clutching at straws. The silence rang out between us, an extension from the stillness of before, and it made me sick.

It was the first time I was unable to stomach the silence.

“Well, uh, um...”

We both opened our mouths, vainly attempting to form the words we knew we were supposed to say, but nothing came out. As our words clashed against each other, Yuigahama let out a fake, cheerful laugh.

“Um, y’see, how do I put it? That’s not really how it is. You know?” As she went on laughing, she looked down pointedly, her face contorting with pain. “I mean, it really isn’t like that...”

I couldn't make out her expression after she hung her head. And yet she spoke so feebly, her voice trembling slightly.

"It's not - not like that... not like that at all..." she murmured.

Yuigahama had always been a nice girl, and she would probably be one for the rest of her life. If reality is a cruel mistress, then a lie is a kind one.

And so kindness itself is a lie.

"Um, well, look," Yuigahama began.

She whipped her head up and glared at me. Her eyes were blurred with tears, and yet still she stared me down resolutely without averting her gaze. I was the one who had to look away.

"...you're an idiot."

And with that, Yuigahama turned and ran. But after a couple of metres, her footsteps began to drag and she slowed down to a somewhat plodding walk.

I watched her until she was gone, and then abruptly I turned away.

Yuigahama might have gone to Saize where all the others were waiting. But that had nothing to do with me.

I hate being with people.

And I hate nice girls.

They follow you wherever you go and yet they're forever out of reach, like the moon beaming down at you from the night sky. The distance between you and them is insurmountable.

You can't stop thinking about them after a simple exchange of greetings and your heart flutters when you text them. When they phone you, you stare dumbly at your call history all day.

But I know how it works. That's what kindness is. I nearly always forget that those who are kind to me are also kind to others. It's not as if I don't feel their kindness or anything. No, I feel it. You could even say I feel it too much. And because of that, I get an allergic reaction.

I've already lived through it all once. A practiced loner is once bitten, twice shy. Confessions of love as penalty for losing at rock-paper-scissors, fake love letters written by boys who copy down what girls dictate to them - I want nothing to do with them. I'm a veteran of war. There's no one better at losing than I am.

-

Forever having expectations and forever getting the wrong idea - at some point I just gave up clinging to false hope.

And so I will forever hate nice girls.

Afterword

Good day, this is Watari Wataru.

This time, I attempted to summon my memories about this thing called youth, but my recollections were so fuzzy it was troubling. The reason for this is that only unpleasant memories I did not want to remember came to mind, so perhaps those incidents remain too close to me. It has been many years since I graduated from high school, so rather than a distance of time, I believe I have yet to build up the mental distance.

Whenever I compare myself now and myself from back then, I sense something similar.

My high school days: I was late two hundred times during those three years. I was late so many times the school called my parents. I wanted to marry a beautiful rich lady when I grew up and live a corrupt, self-indulgent lifestyle. On rainy days, there was a high probability I would skip school.

My mid-twenties: I was late so many times my boss called me. I wanted to marry a beautiful rich lady when I grew up and live a corrupt, self-indulgent lifestyle. I wouldn't really work on my manuscript on rainy days, even when there were sunny spots.

...I never lost touch with my inner boy, whoa.

When you think about it, perhaps you might say that a boy, no matter what his age, is a teenager at heart. Those feelings of jealousy and frustration and ineptitude from one's high school days never go away. And, with a confidence without any basis whatsoever, one embraces the toxic and incomprehensible contradiction known as, *"I am the best at feeling inferior. I am totally superior."* I think doing this makes one able to continue dreaming forever.

Still, there are certainly things that are lost along the way. (...I wanted to go on a date with a girl in my uniform.)

Now then, onto my acknowledgments.

To Ponkan8-sama: Thank you for continuing to draw such wonderful illustrations. Yui was so cute on the front cover I squealed like a teenage girl. I make sure to pray to you five times a day.

To my manager Hoshino-sama: Despite all the inconveniences I caused you this time as well, you helped me to the best of his capabilities. Since I have plans to continue inconveniencing you, please work hard. Thank you very much in advance.

To Aisora Manta-sama¹: Although we are not acquainted, thank you for writing the comments you wrote on this book's jacket. Also, thank you for sending me ganache. I was able to write because of your tasty ganache.

¹ The author of *Haiyore! Nyaruko-san*.

To my family (my father in particular): You've worked hard at your job for so many years. I am able to work in the writing industry today because you worked yourself to the bone. Please take it easy and live a long, fulfilling life. Also, I think our cat has a total grudge on me or is that my imagination?

To all the readers: Thanks to your support for *Yahari Ore no Seishun Love Come wa Machigatteiru* (abb. *Hamachi*; alt. *Oregairu*) I was able to release volume 2. I am truly happy. Thank you very much. I'll keep working hard so I can write an entertaining book next time.

And with that, I lay down my pen for now. If I start running, I will be unable to stop - that is "speed" and "teenage romcom" for you. I sincerely hope we meet again for the next volume.

A certain day in June, from a certain place in Chiba prefecture, while devouring milky Italian gelato with relish,

Wataru Watari

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